

ABSTRACT

The Pursuit of Happiness and the American Regime

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The Declaration assumes that government has a duty to ensure that its citizens can pursue happiness, but it does not specify how or to what degree a government can or should exert influence over and take responsibility for happiness. The project for this dissertation is to consider American novelists as guides on the pursuit of happiness who with a critical eye can present the shortcomings of pursuing happiness in a liberal nation but also present alternatives and correctives compatible with liberalism. American novelists offer insights about the prospects for happiness in a liberal regime and the difficulties Americans face in attaining it. I examine works by four American novelists—Tom Wolfe, Walker Percy, Edith Wharton, and Nathaniel Hawthorne—in order to show how our novelists engage us in our understanding of and the pursuit of happiness. Through depicting characters pursuing happiness, our novelists show how our political and social order does or does not facilitate the pursuit of happiness and what individual decisions can contribute to or detract from happiness. In so doing, our novelists provide signposts and other markers to indicate what roads and pathways are or are not likely to contribute to happiness. The individual enjoys meaningful freedom to act on his own and

in coordination with others for the sake of pursuing happiness. Our novelists point us toward each other as our greatest resource to help us and to guide us toward happiness.

The Pursuit of Happiness and the American Regime

by

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A Dissertation

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EPIGRAPH

“And not only is the human heart a place of darkness which, with certainty, no human eye can penetrate; the qualities of the heart need darkness and protection against the light of the public to grow and to remain what they are meant to be, innermost motives which are not for the public display.”

From Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution*.

“Oh Happiness! Our being's end and aim!
Good, Pleasure, Ease, Content! Whate'er thy name:
That something still which prompts th' eternal sigh.”

From Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man*.

“Do you seriously believe that having money automatically brings you happiness?”

“Well, no, but it doesn't automatically depress me either.”

From *How to Marry a Millionaire*.

CHAPTER ONE

Understanding the Pursuit of Happiness

The pursuit of happiness is inextricably linked to the United States as a reason for its creation and also as a measure for its success or failure as a regime. The Declaration of Independence boldly asserts that among the “unalienable Rights” endowed to humans are “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” The Declaration further claims that security of these rights is both the impetus for establishing government and also the cause for the “consent of the governed.” If a government fails to secure these rights, including the pursuit of happiness, then the people have a right to alter, abolish and institute a new government that is hopefully better suited for the task. The Declaration assumes that not only are the people able to form governments to secure their rights, but that they can evaluate and ought to evaluate their governments. The people have the right to institute whatever form of government that they judge “most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” Taking the Declaration seriously also means exploring and evaluating how well our regime succeeds in providing for the pursuit of happiness for the sake of our present, continued consent.

Although the liberal theory that informs our Declaration—and our Constitution--leaves the pursuit of happiness to the private realm and restricts the role of the state to the creation of the conditions that facilitate that pursuit, it is difficult, and indeed, impossible to pursue happiness with no notion of what happiness is. The question of happiness cannot be long absent from our public consciousness as a nation. And indeed, it has not

been. Liberal theorists have continued to explore the relation between happiness and liberty since the time of our founding, and more recently “happiness studies” have gained a preeminence in psychology and social science in attempt to provide guidance on policies that implement the pursuit of happiness. My dissertation begins, in this chapter, with a survey and what liberal theory and social scientists tell us about happiness. The inadequacies of both lead us to seek other resources—and American novelists, I argue, have throughout our history reflected on the meaning of happiness and the ways of its pursuit. In their literary works, they have called upon their fellow citizens to engage in this inquiry.

My dissertation focuses on how American novelists tap our potential—even out of our self-interest and desire for happiness—to transcend narrow self-interest and overcome our disconnection from others. As voices in our literary tradition, they engage us to think about private and public goods that contribute to happiness, and about the ways in which we can achieve them individually and in common. In contrast to liberal theorists and happiness researchers, American novelists cultivate our judgment about the meaning of happiness and the implications of our choices and actions for our lives. Each of my subsequent chapters will examine how one of four representative American novelists, Tom Wolfe, Walker Percy, Edith Wharton, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, portray and evaluate the pursuit of happiness in their selected writings. They serve as guides to how we understand and pursue happiness that are also compatible with liberalism’s commitment to protecting the plurality of voices within the United States.

Liberal Theory on Happiness

Early liberal thinkers, like Hobbes and Locke, argued that liberty was essential to the pursuit of happiness. The social contract that secures the political liberty over natural liberty allows the individual to pursue his well-being, but leaves it to the individual's ability, holding that happiness is experienced solely by the individual and as a result of his own efforts. Liberal governments cannot provide happiness, but only liberal governments, in their protection of freedom, offer the possibility of happiness.

Hobbes conceived of happiness in hedonic terms. In the course of his famous discussion of manners in *Leviathan*, Hobbes says that “[f]elicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the later.”¹ As Hobbes explains, the reason why felicity cannot be a “*Summun Bonum*” is because individual desires are in constant motion and that to secure what one has in the present for future enjoyment, one must acquire more. By focusing on the character of felicity in this life, Hobbes indicates that it is a passion to be satisfied within the body politic. Felicity accompanies the repeated successful satisfaction of desire. Individuals all aim “to the procuring, but also to the assuring of a contented life.”² Consequently, the manner in which individuals pursue their well-being differs only because of “the diversity of passions” and “from the difference of the knowledge, or opinions each one has of the causes” that bring about the desired effect.³ The diversity of passions brings about the

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), part I, chapter XI.

² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part I, chapter XI.

³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part I, chapter XI.

differences in desires among individuals for their well-being. And the difference of the knowledge of causes means that individuals will pursue the various objects of their desires better or worse given the character of their knowledge. Even within Hobbes' liberal state, it seems unlikely that many individuals would be able to use their political liberty so well as to experience felicity frequently.

Locke responds to Hobbes' view of happiness when he argue that happiness may result through the continual success at suspending satisfaction of desire for the sake of securing a future good. The obstacle to happiness is that we direct our wills towards the desires that relieve us from the most immediate pain. Consequently, we are waylaid from pursuing the greatest good into working to satisfy the more immediate sources of unease that afflict the body and mind. The natural desires of our body continually put us at unease for no sooner have we satisfied a hunger that our body wants rest, or we think about our next meal. We also have "adopted desires" for things like "*Honour, Power, or Riches*" that like natural wants also press on us as contingent and necessary to our happiness (italics in original).⁴ And we are capable of suspending satisfaction of immediate desires and wants for the sake of securing some other future and presumably more desirable good. More precisely, liberty consists in the mind's power "to *suspend* the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires."⁵ Liberty thus consists in the ability to pause and reflect on the outcome of satisfying a desire, to judge whether indulging a desire will cause more pain or pleasure and what the best mode of doing so might be, so

⁴ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited with introduction by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1979), book II, chapter XXI, section 45.

⁵ Locke, *Human Understanding*, book II, chapter XXI, section 47.

that we might act with our long-term happiness in mind. Our freedom is in following our own judgment concerning how we direct our will. We should always fix our minds on the examination of desires and determine our wills only to that which can further our pursuit of happiness.

Although Locke restores happiness to be a goal that can fix our will on our long term interests and well-being, he removes pleasure from the chain of choices, decisions, and events leading up to happiness itself. In this respect, a Lockean pursuit of happiness resembles a “joyless quest for joy.”⁶ Early liberalism presents two choices for happiness: felicity is joined to the satisfaction of desires but does not endure; or happiness is a goal sought but not enjoyed along the way.⁷ Critics of liberalism, such as Rousseau and Kant, have complained that the pursuit of happiness promotes low, sensual pleasure over higher order goals. They also object that liberalism allows narrow private self-interest to trump collective public good, which is really where the individual’s liberty and interest coincide. Adopting some of these criticisms, liberals have come to recognize tension or even opposition between liberty and happiness. Some liberals have consequently turned away from happiness and, in so doing, sought to elevate liberalism toward loftier goals for political liberty. Benjamin Constant, for example, considered liberty and happiness to be nearly incompatible, but saw this incompatibility as an opportunity to ennoble

⁶ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 251.

⁷ Locke’s best attempt to bring pleasure back into the chase of happiness is that rational thought is itself satisfying. The task of education is to order the mind so that “on all occasions it may be disposed to consent to nothing but what may be suitable to the dignity and excellency of a rational creature.” Education prepares individuals to use their reason to guide themselves.

John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), §31.

liberalism. The downside to political liberty is that individuals can make poor choices regarding what will make them happy. Happiness is too private a goal and too dependent on individual effort. Constant assumes that it is very unlikely that individuals will make decisions that will lead them to happiness. Constant argued that “self-development” not happiness is the true aim of liberalism.⁸ Instead of happiness, Constant argues, we must be content with the “noble disquiet which pursues and torments us.”⁹ Constant finds nobility in dissatisfaction that, he believes, is the result of political liberty. In this way, Constant attempts to rescue liberty from its supposedly sordid association with happiness as pleasure and raises political liberty’s goal above happiness to the higher, nobler goal of “self-development.”¹⁰

Another course in modernity for happiness is found among utilitarians. Jeremy Bentham's "greatest happiness of the greatest number" principle remains a hallmark of utilitarianism.¹¹ Bentham even devised a seven point value system for the measurement of happiness for the individual and society.¹² But even Bentham’s concept of pleasure as happiness remained too low for some thinkers. Instead of downgrading pleasure as

⁸ Benjamin Constant, “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of The Moderns,” in *Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 327.

⁹ Constant, 327.

¹⁰Constant, 327.

¹¹ Jeremy Bentham, “A Fragment on Government,” introduction by F. C. Montague (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), 93.

¹² See Jeremy Bentham, *The Principle of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 29-32, for his seven point value system for the measurement of felicity.

Constant did, Mill upgrades pleasure and happiness.¹³ Mill, as Amy Gutmann explains, incorporates happiness into “a rational system of desires, a system where rational preference and pleasure coincide.”¹⁴ As Mill explains, “[h]uman beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and, when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification.”¹⁵ Happiness understood as the satisfaction of our rational desires serves to elevate it as an objective. Although even Mill concludes that those who have lower desires will find them more easily satisfied, a “highly endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect.”¹⁶ Lesser endowed beings are less conscious of the world’s myriad imperfections and so can be pleased. A more “highly endowed being” learns how to endure the world’s flaws and never covets the happiness of a lesser endowed being.¹⁷ Whereas Mill at first seems to ennoble pleasure, in the end he, like Constant, praises suffering nobly over happiness.

So too are contemporary liberal theorists more likely to praise liberty for some other good it produces or promotes than individual happiness. They also distance themselves from happiness so as to distance themselves from utilitarians, whom they regard with suspect commitment to rights. Happiness as pleasure is too slippery a concept that may be used to justify abridgment of rights for the sake of the pleasure of others.

¹³ See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in which Mill says that “[b]y happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure” (13).

¹⁴ Amy Gutmann, *Liberal Equality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980), 142.

¹⁵ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 15.

¹⁶ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 18.

¹⁷ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 18.

Regarding happiness in terms defined by utilitarians, liberals consequently emphasize justice and rights over happiness. One of the more thorough contemporary discussions on happiness may be found in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls's image of the happy person is one who "is in the way of a successful execution (more or less) of a rational plan of life drawn up under (more or less) favorable conditions, and he is reasonably confident that his plan can be carried through."¹⁸ Rawls retains the liberal belief in the individual pursuit of happiness, because of the difference of "endowments and circumstances."¹⁹ Individual rational life plans will differ. Unlike Hobbes and Locke who saw that the social contract was instrumental to the pursuit of happiness, Rawls sees a conflict between happiness as pleasure and justice as formed by social contract theory.

Rawls' concept of happiness conforms to the requirements of justice as fairness. Justice is prior to happiness. Rawls explicitly distinguishes justice as fairness's conception of happiness from the Declaration's, which is, according to him, hedonistic and primarily concerned with one's welfare without consideration for the welfare of others. Additionally, Rawls finds the Declaration's ideals uncomfortably noncommittal with regard to justice as fairness: "To say of someone that he seeks happiness does not, it seems, imply that he is prepared either to violate or to affirm these restrictions."²⁰ Happiness is "the satisfaction of rational desire."²¹ Rawls emphasizes that justice as fairness keeps its distance from individuals as they execute their rational life plans.

¹⁸ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), §63. For qualifications to this claim, see §83.

¹⁹ Rawls, §63.

²⁰ Rawls, §83.

²¹ Rawls, §15.

Justice as fairness does not question how individuals make use of their advantages and situations in life (whatever is given after the veil of ignorance has been drawn aside) and it does not judge among rational life plans so long “as it does not violate what justice demands.”²² However, happiness is not merely having a rational life plan, but also being reasonably assured that successful execution is possible, which is partially dependant on having “reasonably favorable circumstances” in which to execute it.²³ These “reasonably favorable circumstances” are put in place through the realization of justice as fairness. While obviously the individual’s effort is necessary to the design and realization of his happiness, Rawls places great weight on having favorable circumstances in place.²⁴

The individual who follows a rational life plan creates a unity of his life in contrast to the hedonistic individual who chases after maximizing pleasurable experiences. By emphasizing the necessity of having a rational plan for one’s life, Rawls elevates the highest individual aim above mere hedonic pursuits. The happy life is like a well-executed artistic achievement such as a painting that even despite inevitable, unfavorable circumstances and poor execution still reveals “a certain completeness which though marred by circumstance and human failing is evident from the whole.”²⁵ According to Rawls, we do not pursue happiness per se, but we seek to fulfill our rational life plans, which may bring happiness incidentally. Happiness is not the goal of the original position. Behind the veil of ignorance, “[t]he parties’ aim in the original position

²² Rawls, §16.

²³ Rawls, §15.

²⁴ “When circumstances are especially favorable and the execution particularly successful, one’s happiness is complete,” §83.

²⁵ Rawls, §83.

is to establish just and favorable conditions for each to fashion his own unity."²⁶

Happiness is not identical with one's rational plan but a byproduct.

It is not surprising, then, that liberal theory is considered inadequate as a resource for understanding happiness. Indeed, happiness researchers have identified poor guidance concerning happiness as one of the main shortcomings of liberal nations. Happiness research, they argue, can inform our understanding of the causes and correlates of happiness. We will be able to craft improved and broader measures of well-being that will be useful for making more informed choices to promote human well-being. It is to the position of happiness researchers I now turn.

The Quantitative Approach to Happiness

The modern quantitative study of happiness began during the 1960s, and within the last 30 years, psychologists spearheaded the investigation into the characteristics, causes, correlates, and consequences of happiness that flourishes today.²⁷ Psychologists developed the term subjective well-being (SWB) to refer to happiness. SWB includes "people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction."²⁸ The key to the success of happiness research is that self-referential reports of well-being avoid the difficulty of finding a single, global understanding of happiness.

²⁶ Rawls, §85.

²⁷ As of 2007, the World Database of Happiness, directed by Ruut Veenhoven, boasts of 15,000 studies related to happiness—the most complete inventory of happiness research. In comparison, in 1984, Veenhoven published a "Databook of Happiness" that lists only 245 studies validly measuring happiness. Ruut Veenhoven *Conditions of Happiness* (Hingham, MA: Kluwer Boston Academic Publishers, 1984).

²⁸ Ed Diener, Eunkook M. Suh, Richard E. Lucas, and Heidi L. Smith, "Subjective Well-Being: Three Decades of Progress," in *Psychological Bulletin* 125 (1999), 277.

Each individual assesses his well-being according to her terms and feelings and not to any set objective standard. Early happiness research suggested that SWB fluctuated in the short term, but that in the long term individuals adapted to changes in their environment and returned to a set-point of well-being.²⁹ This process of returning to a baseline level of well-being is known as hedonic adaptation. From a psychological perspective, hedonic adaptation to major life events is considered a healthy and necessary psychological function designed to shield individuals from potentially harmful consequences of heightened and prolonged emotional states.³⁰ On the other hand, the conclusions of such studies leave little room for human agency or government policy, since the individual is psychologically programmed to become used to any perceivable benefit or harm in her experience and to return inevitably to a set point of SWB.³¹

²⁹ See Philip Brickman & Donald T. Campbell, "Hedonic Relativism and Planning the Good Society," in M. H. Appley, ed., *Adaptation Level Theory: A Symposium* (New York: Academic Press, 1971), 287-302 and Philip Brickman, Dan Coates, and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, "Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36 (1978). In the 1970s, Philip Brickman and Donald T. Campbell posited that individuals may experience short-term fluctuations in well-being, but regardless of good and bad fortune, individuals eventually adjust to their circumstances and return to a set-point of well-being. The implication was that individuals had relatively little control over their long term happiness and that political, social, and economic policy and conditions could not significantly and permanently affect SWB. In support of this theory, Philip Brickman, Dan Coates, and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman compared the well-being of lottery winners and paralyzed accident victims to find that in the long term lottery winners are not generally happier than paraplegics. Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman hypothesize that returns to base levels of well-being happened due to contrast and habituation. Although winning the lottery is generally considered a positive event, high happiness levels do not sustain, because now "many ordinary events may seem less pleasurable, since they now compare less favorably with past experience." Secondly, over time, the impact of winning the lottery delivers less pleasure and, consequently, contributes less to the winner's well-being as the winner habituates to it. Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman argue that contrast and habituation operate in the reverse manner for paralyzed accident victims. In comparison with their extreme misfortune, paraplegics perceive "mundane pleasures" more favorably; over time, they become habituated to their misfortune and so it affects their well-being less than over time (918).

³⁰ See Shane Frederick and George Loewenstein, "Hedonic Adaption," in *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, eds. Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, and Norbert Schwarz (New York: Sage, 1999), 302-329.

³¹ Veenhoven, 102. Richard E. Lucas, "Personality and Subjective Well-Being," in *The Science of Subjective Well-Being*, eds. Michael Eid and Randy J. Larsen, 172; and Benjamin Radcliff "Politics,

Economists have also contributed much to happiness research in their efforts to uncover the relationship of the role of wealth to happiness. In 1973, Richard A. Easterlin spearheaded economic happiness research and shaped subsequent debate with the claim that economic growth and improved living standards has not contributed to greater happiness, which has become commonly known as “Easterlin’s paradox.”³² Comparing well-being surveys from the end of World War II and rises in national average income, Easterlin shows that despite significant increases in individual incomes, there has been no increase in national happiness. He offers two related explanations. First, once individual basic needs are met, individuals evaluate their well-being on a relative not absolute scale. Individuals assess their well-being in terms of others and whether they have more or less than what is perceived to be “the social norm.”³³ Secondly, as Easterlin’s more recent research emphasizes, the economic standard which individuals use to assess their well-being shifts constantly above what they possess. Individuals evaluate their well-being in terms of their aspirational economic standards and so they are always dissatisfied with

Markets, and Life Satisfaction: The Political Economy of Human Happiness,” *The American Political Science Review* 95 (2001): 940.

³² See Richard A. Easterlin, “Does Money Buy Happiness?” *Public Interest* 30 (1973): 3. In contrast, some economists counter that Easterlin’s thesis rests on too little data to conclude that wealth has no effect on SWB and that there is a positive connection between happiness and economic growth. See Angus Deaton, “Income, Aging, Health, and Well-Being around the World: Evidence from the Gallup World Poll,” National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 13317 (August 2007); Michael R. Hagerty and Ruut Veenhoven, “Wealth and Happiness Revisited: Growing National Income *Does* Go with Greater Happiness,” *Social Indicators Research* 64 (2003): 1-27; Michael R. Hagerty, “Social Comparisons of Income in One’s Community: Evidence From National Surveys of Income and Happiness,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78 (2000): 764-771; Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, “Economic Growth and Subjective Well-Being: Reassessing the Easterlin Paradox,” *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* (Spring 2008): 1-35, and Ruut Veenhoven, “Is Happiness Relative?” *Social Indicators Research* 24 (1991): 1-34.

³³ Easterlin, “Does Money Buy Happiness?” 4.

what they have. Individuals are stuck on the hedonic treadmill.³⁴ Individuals underestimate the extent to which hedonic adaptation and social comparison reduce the impact of wealth on their well-being. Consequently, they spend an amount of time pursuing wealth disproportionate to the amount of happiness it provides. On the national level, wealthier nations consume more resources in their fruitless pursuit of happiness. Economic growth has not increased happiness, but inflated material aspirations. The perverse consequence of material progress, Easterlin concludes, is that the “increase in material aspirations in a society...negates the positive impact of income growth on happiness.”³⁵ Easterlin is deeply concerned that without serious efforts to reform how people perceive their interests, individuals will continue to believe that more money and social positional goods will make them happier in spite of studies that show that non-pecuniary goals affect well-being more positively and lastingly. As Easterlin sees it, the only way to get off the hedonic treadmill is to consider how individual preferences can be altered through policy.

The potential for happiness studies to impact our political decisions and policy is immense. Economist Bruno S. Frey declares that economic happiness research will have nothing short of a “revolutionary impact on policy,”³⁶ and British economist and “happiness tsar,” Richard Layard heralds the new science of happiness for its potential to

³⁴ Hedonic adaptation and social comparison “raise their aspirations to about the same extent as their actual gains, and leave them feeling no happier than before” in Richard E. Easterlin, “Explaining Happiness,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America* 100 (2003): 11182.

³⁵ Easterlin, “Does Money Buy Happiness?” 4.

³⁶ Bruno S. Frey, *Happiness: A Revolution in Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008), 203.

inform policy making.³⁷ Progress has been customarily measured by economic growth, but “the rise of material wealth in the West has failed to deliver a happier society.”³⁸

Political scientists gladly take up the question of how policy may be better crafted to improve well-being rather than merely increasing economic growth. In *The Politics of Happiness*, Derek Bok is deeply impressed with the findings of happiness research and believes it represents the fulfillment of the utilitarian project to measure happiness. According to Bok, Jeremy Bentham's "felicific calculus" may have been an object of bemused philosophic interest for the last two hundred years, but now psychologists have succeeded where Bentham did not. Consequently, happiness researchers can assist policy makers to “decide which legislative programs are most likely to improve the well-being

³⁷ Stuart Jeffries, “Will This Man Make You Happiness?”, *The Guardian*, June 24, 2008, G2 and Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

³⁸ In a report commissioned by French President Nicholas Sarkozy, Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi present an impressive examination of the shortcomings of GDP and consider how to craft fuller, “more encompassing measures of social progress and societal well-being, which, while incorporating metrics of market activity, are not limited to such metrics.” Joseph E. Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, *Mis-measuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up* (New York: The New Press, 2010), xxv. The commission's report makes the case for new metrics that can better reflect non-market activity (such as non-paid care-giving), progress, well-being, and sustainability and for the political leadership to advance a global initiative to shift toward broader well-being metrics. As of this writing, only Bhutan has instituted Gross National Happiness (GNH) over GDP in which every policy is assessed according to its impact on national well-being. Increased interest has been shown in following Bhutan's example and in developing a new metrics for accessing well-being in terms other than GDP. See Brian Domitrovic, “Gross Domestic Happiness?” *Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2009, Opinion, Eastern edition; Lisa Grainger, “The Moment: A Happier Measure,” *The Times* (United Kingdom), January 2, 2010, Magazine, National Edition; John Lichfield, “Forget GDP, It's Time for Gross Domestic Happiness,” *The Independent* (London), September 15, 2009, World, First edition. In 2009, French President Nicholas Sarkozy announced that France would develop happiness metrics to correct the deficiencies of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The Australian well-being framework, the Canadian Wellbeing Institute, and Great Britain's Happy Planet Index are all nascent attempts to provide alternative and supplemental measures of national well-being. See Matt Wade, “Freedom Gains Value in Treasury's Books,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), August 28, 2004, First Edition, Business; Kenneth Kidd, “Coming Soon: Good-life Index: Experts Develop Measure that Looks Beyond GDP to Gauge Quality of Life and Spur Policy Change,” *The Toronto Star*, June 10, 2009, A06, and Duncan Campbell, “Quality of Life Report: Vanuata Tops Wellbeing and Environment Index as Britain Fails to Make Top 100: Is it Any Surprise that the People who Live Here are the Happiest in the World?” *The Guardian* (London), July 12, 2006, Guardian International Pages, 23.

of the citizenry.”³⁹ Bok claims that happiness research will help craft better legislation, reprioritize our goals by locating “sources of persistent unhappiness, such as mental illness and chronic pain,” that deserve heightened legislative attention, and even lead to new institutional changes in operation of government.⁴⁰

Bok finds support for his proposal that happiness research should guide our policy in a number of sources: “the idea of happiness as a goal of public policy reached its high watermark in the eighteenth century,” he writes.⁴¹ He lists Cesare Beccaria, Claude-Adrien Helvétius, Francis Hutcheson, the French Constitution of June 24, 1793, the American Declaration of Independence (plus the various contemporary state constitutions that mentioned happiness), and Jeremy Bentham as all promoting happiness as an aim of policy.⁴² Bok cites the French Constitution of June 24, 1793 that “Le but de la société est la bonheur commun” (the goal of society is general happiness).⁴³ Bok does not consider how these sources may differ with respect to the character of happiness and so the way(s) of its pursuit and attainment.⁴⁴ Bok does not pause to distinguish the Declaration’s

³⁹ Derek Bok, *The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn From the New Research on Well-Being* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010): 204.

⁴⁰ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 61.

⁴¹ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 4.

⁴² For more on state constitutions and their language concerning happiness, see Howard Mumford Jones's *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 22-28.

⁴³ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 4. Bok fails to note that the French Constitution of June 24, 1793 was the Jacobin constitution. Darrin M. McMahon notes that “the Jacobins [made] happiness a central concern” (261) in *Happiness: a History* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 261. McMahon observes that one architect planned that “the great avenue leading from the *place de la Révolution* to its necessary endpoint—where else?—the square of happiness, *la place du bonheur*” (262).

⁴⁴ Bok cites Darrin M. McMahon’s history of happiness to support his point that happiness was the major policy aim of the 18th century and borrows McMahon’s list of thinkers for his example, but

pursuit of happiness from the French Constitution's goal of "general happiness" or from Bentham's greatest happiness for the greatest number of people principle. In practice, Bok seems to assume that policymakers will craft policy in Bentham's terms as the maximization of pleasure and avoidance of pain for the greatest number of people.

Bok cheerfully announces that the fruitless debates of philosophers and liberal thinkers show signs of being resolved and transferred to more capable hands. Happiness research promises to clarify old philosophic and theological debates by putting their claims aside and replacing them with the findings of happiness researchers. Bok grants that

[i]t is true that many of these [happiness] findings merely echo what some philosopher or theologian said centuries ago. Nevertheless, since prominent thinkers have so often disagreed with one another discussing happiness, the new research does a valuable service by providing empirical evidence to suggest which insights are correct and which seem to be invalid.⁴⁵

The great advantage of happiness research is that it is based on empirical research that can yield consensus among researchers and indicate clearer practical applications. For these reasons, Bok advises that we should stop fretting about old claims about justice and inequality made by liberal thinkers like John Rawls who generally advocated redistribution of wealth or other such massive re-structuring of society measures. Happiness research suggests that inequality of income does not have much of an effect on well-being and higher incomes do not bring greater happiness. According to Bok, one problem with these liberal approaches is that they still over-emphasized the role of

McMahon does not include the Declaration. In fact, McMahon treats the United States in a separate chapter titled "Liberalism and Its Discontents"; see *Happiness: A History*, 312-338.

⁴⁵ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 204.

money in well-being.⁴⁶ Secondly, liberal thinkers base their arguments on differing “moral intuition,” which yields as many ways to allocate resources as there are liberal thinkers.⁴⁷ Being based on empirical studies and being more akin to the behavioral sciences, happiness researchers are more like to reach greater consensus and so can be more useful to lawmakers.

One of the central teachings gained from happiness research is that individuals do not always make good decisions concerning their happiness. Bok is impressed by this finding.⁴⁸ The second significant finding is that high incomes do not contribute much to life satisfaction. Consequently, the central political problem to be overcome is to convince Americans that greater wealth generally does not contribute to happiness. The greatest risk most Americans face to their happiness is that the preoccupation with accumulating wealth causes them to neglect the things that contribute to happiness (aside from genetic traits) such as “marriage, social relationships, employment, perceived health, religion, and the quality of government.”⁴⁹ This is unfortunate on an individual level. On the national level, this means that the United States pursues economic growth,

⁴⁶ Moreover, Bok notes liberal thinkers differ greatly with respect to what justice requires. In contrast to Rawls, Ronald Dworkin argues that justice requires equality of capabilities whereas Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen argue for equality of initial resources.

⁴⁷ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 87.

⁴⁸ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 5. Bok repeats this point throughout his book. He says “[p]eople often misjudge what will bring them enduring happiness or pain” (156). In his conclusion, he begins that “[p]eople do not always know what will give them lasting satisfaction” and underestimate their ability to adapt to misfortune (206).

⁴⁹ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 17.

which has not increased well-being and mistakenly measures its success according to productivity. Bok argues that GDP is “a very crude way of estimating welfare.”⁵⁰

Despite evidence suggesting that GDP is an inadequate measure of well-being, the difficulty remains that most Americans believe economic growth is desirable. Bok discusses whether lawmakers ought to forgo the wishes of their constituents’ opinion for the sake of following happiness experts when public opinion is contrary to what happiness studies demonstrate (presumably conclusively) to make people happy. Should lawmakers reflect only public opinion or should they do what will make the public happy? On less prominent or polarizing issues, he argues, legislators have a great deal of discretion for decision-making and may be able to follow happiness research, and “most voters would probably prefer to be happy rather than have their representatives mechanically accept their mistaken impressions of how to reach this goal.”⁵¹

Ultimately, though, Bok understands that legislative discretion is not the optimal way in which to increase the influence of happiness findings on legislation. Since Americans often do not know what will bring them happiness, a sound chance at a happy life begins by being properly educated. Elementary and high school teachers generally are not trained to teach happiness studies, school at this level should focus on

⁵⁰ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 40. Because GDP measures only productivity, it may include harmful goods and services and does not account for other activities that benefit society. For example, GDP has the perverse effect of considering the manufacture of cigarettes as contributing to productivity whereas child-care is not counted at all. Moreover, economic growth has occurred at the expense of environmental sustainability and so threatens the welfare of future generations. Additionally, economic growth has contributed to undesirable phenomena such as urban sprawl, crowded highways, stress, insecurity, and long work hours. Bok rhetorically asks if it is so that “rising incomes have failed to make Americans happier... what is the point of working such long hours and risking environmental disaster in order to keep on doubling and redoubling our Gross Domestic Product?” Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 63. He concludes that GDP is insufficient because “a nation’s total production of goods and services is at best a means to other ends and often a dubious means at that.” Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 40

⁵¹ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 59.

encouraging a breadth of interests and pursuits. At the collegiate level, however, more can be accomplished to educate young adults about making satisfying life decisions. Bok rejects the great books programs, because they "are better at raising questions than supplying answers."⁵² By presenting the variety of opinions by the best thinkers, their chief value is to impress students with the "complexity of the quest for meaning and fulfillment."⁵³ However, happiness courses taught by behavioral scientists offer the chance for students to learn about the "probabilities that certain activities and conditions will bring satisfaction, lead to unhappiness or have no lasting effect one way or the other."⁵⁴ Obviously, happiness courses cannot tell students how to have a happy life any more than great books courses can. Bok cautions that the findings of happiness research do not apply in every case, but they offer "conclusions...[that] are at least worth knowing in deciding how to live one's life."⁵⁵ The further benefit of educating students in this new way is that it will increase demand for policy better crafted to encourage well-being.⁵⁶

⁵²Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 59.

⁵³Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 59.

⁵⁴ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 59.

⁵⁵ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 170-72.

⁵⁶ Bok acknowledges that individuals bear some responsibility to achieve happiness and that there are "too many pitfalls and setbacks in human lives that are beyond the reach of the state." Moreover, Bok observes that much unhappiness is "rooted in genetic sources that are not susceptible to manipulation by official policies." But despite the humility of this statement, Bok optimistically concludes that "[a]s science advances, perhaps, the time may conceivably come when government can help everyone achieve a state of perfect contentment, but that day still seems far in the future." Bok remains committed to the notion that through science we may be able to exert further control over the events in our lives and even over our genetic inheritance. Though it may be far into the future, universal happiness is a goal to be sought. Individuals must look forward to the day in which better techniques develop for the achievement of happiness. Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 52.

Bok downplays the possibility that happiness research could be used to justify undesirable policy and points to the Declaration and the Constitution to provide the necessary safeguards against oppressive and unjust legislation.⁵⁷ Although Bok hopes that policymakers will use happiness research to inform policymaking, he expects that judges will continue to uphold the various civil liberties protected in the Bill of Rights by which to judge the impact of policy on the populace. However, Bok does explain why judges would not also want to draw from happiness studies. Bok fails to recognize how constitutional safeguards depend on a liberal understanding of the limits of the state to promote a comprehensive public good. Through his attempt to sever ties with liberal thought and its so-called preoccupation with material goods, Bok takes for granted that those constitutional safeguards can survive independent of their theoretical grounding

The dangers that happiness research poses for human freedom are even more obvious in the work of Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein. They observe that individuals make bad decisions about how they might attain a longer, healthier, and better life. They claim that individuals would not make poor decisions if they “possessed complete information, unlimited cognitive abilities, and complete self-control.”⁵⁸ And they maintain that psychology and neuroscience show us the ways in which the human brain makes mistakes and that “our understanding of human behavior can be improved by

⁵⁷ Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 48-9. For example, although studies show that people who attend church and engage in community service are happier than those who do not, the government cannot require non-churchgoers to attend a church. More so than the Declaration, the Constitution provides the much needed legal safeguards such as the Free Exercise clause that “protect the government from trying to promote well-being by manipulative or unjust means” (57). Bok notes that “free speech and equal rights for individuals and minorities...must be upheld whatever the effects on happiness” (55).

⁵⁸ Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 19.

appreciating how people systematically go wrong."⁵⁹ Thaler and Sunstein nevertheless pitch their proposal of libertarian paternalism as a common sense middle course between two extremes—between “One Size Fits All” and “Just Maximize Choices.” The latter perspective, they claim, has become “a policy mantra” that holds that the only way to avoid a single mandate is through the neutral maximization of choice.⁶⁰ However, it is impossible to present choice neutrally to the human mind. Consequently, we ought to embrace this psychological fact, they argue, and construct choices so as to encourage individuals to make better decisions—the decisions that they would make if given sufficient information, time, and sophisticated analytical mental capabilities. They therefore propose that “choice architects...try to influence people's behavior in order to make their lives longer, healthier, and better.”⁶¹

A “choice architect” takes “responsibility for organizing the context in which people make decisions”⁶² by simply presenting better decisions as the default position. Since individuals are more likely to choose passively the default option, the default option should also be the better option. “Choice architects can preserve freedom of choice while also nudging people in directions that will improve their lives.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*, 19.

⁶⁰ Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*, 9.

⁶¹ Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*, 5. Choice architecture, as Thaler and Sunstein note, is not unprecedented, but rather an ordinary and commonly employed procedure in which seemingly small decisions such as where to locate bathrooms in an office building make big differences in individual behavior and make things such as office buildings user friendly. The private sector constructs choice regularly, and the government does as well, but not with the needed self-consciousness to make better choice constructions. This is why Thaler and Sunstein argue for the legitimacy of constructed choices so that the government may more intentionally construct better framed choices.

⁶² Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*, 3.

⁶³ Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*, 252.

Individuals would remain free to choose less desirable options, but such a decision would require a more active choice. Whereas liberal theory begins with the understanding that freedom is achieved by individual effort, Thaler and Sunstein's "libertarian paternalism" locates freedom in passively following a default option constructed by an architect of choice.

How American Novelists Contribute to the Pursuit of Happiness

Because our liberal principles do not define happiness for us, choice architects can step up to try to do so. In his essay on "The United States as Regime and the Sources of American Way of Life," Joseph Cropsey offers us an understanding of our liberal regime that demands that we resist their efforts. Our very liberalism, he argues, makes us a self-reflective nation, not only does it guarantee the freedom for reflection on our individual and collective goals as human beings, but because it itself does not undertake to define those goals for us. As a liberal regime, the United States is an incomplete regime, or limited political order, that acknowledges and invites criticism for the sake of promoting a plurality of ends, low as well as high, highest ends. Americans are guided in their pursuit of happiness not simply by our founding and other public documents—our "parchment regime," as Cropsey calls it—but by a host of ungoverned resources, such as art, science, and religion, which shape and form how we live and pursue happiness.⁶⁴

Thus, Americans are continuously and collectively, not simply through Congress and other official public avenues, participating in deliberations about the various goods we

⁶⁴ Joseph Cropsey, "Introduction: The United States as Regime and the Sources of the American Way of Life," in *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980) 2-7.

seek and how well our political order facilitates our pursuit of happiness. We must therefore, Cropsey claims, look at our regime "in the wide sense that includes not only our great political documents but the important influences on our way of life that emanate from unofficial thought" to understand how Americans live and pursue happiness.⁶⁵

Although happiness studies and liberal theory both offer significant insights into happiness, they are unable to consider the whole American regime and the individual's experience within it. Our novelists depict the individual's pursuit within the American regime as a whole—informed both by liberalism and critical voices. Through their deeds, our novelists show us how the unofficial part of our regime contributes to and acts in concert with our official political order to promote the individual's pursuit of happiness. As I shall argue, our novelists offer us constructive criticism concerning the pursuit of happiness that highlights the deficiencies of liberalism without incurring the dangers of happiness research. They help us to correct those deficiencies by exploring other resources and ways in which we can pursue happiness.

American literature offers insights into the pursuit of happiness through its stories of particular individuals trying to find happiness in differing ways within the American regime and how our liberal principles have and have not encouraged that pursuit. Our novelists have anticipated many of shortcomings observed by happiness researchers, but have also uncovered problems and more subtle difficulties that quantitative studies cannot easily reveal. In an article presenting the theoretical grounds for the study of politics and literature, Catherine Zuckert explains that "[c]lassical works of American

⁶⁵ Cropsey, "Introduction: The United States as a Regime," 12.

fiction do raise questions about the fundamental assumptions of liberal democracy.”⁶⁶

Authors foresee and imaginatively depict the conflicts that liberal individuals may encounter as a result of their liberal principles. Authors most commonly explore potential conflicts and gaps in our regime's liberal principles by showing us the "effects of the regime on the formation of character.”⁶⁷ Literature shows us better than other methods how individuals are "products of a certain kind of community.”⁶⁸ Consequently, novels cannot be read like treatises because the teaching of a novel is given within a particular context, whereas theory teaches by abstraction and generalization and thus cannot be simply applied to reality. Technically, authors engage not in political theory, but present a "very special or peculiar kind of *political thought*" (italics mine).⁶⁹ Edith

⁶⁶ Catherine Zuckert, "On Reading Classic American Novelists as Political Thinkers," *The Journal of Politics* 43 (1981): 683. Catherine Zuckert is not alone in supporting the idea that political scientists can gain insight from the study of politics and literature. See Ethan Fishman, "Images of Lockean America in Contemporary American Fiction" in *Reading Political Stories: Representations of Politics in Novels and Pictures*, ed. Maureen Whitebrook (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992); Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Poetry, Politics, and the Comic Spirit," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28 (1995): 197-200, and Maureen Whitebrook, "Introduction" in *Reading Political Stories: Representations of Politics in Novels and Pictures*, ed. Maureen Whitebrook (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992), 6. Drawing a tight connection between the study of politics and literature in the liberal regime, Ethan Fishman argues that Locke and the American founders believed that "public virtue would emerge as a necessary corollary to a society that fostered the free and open pursuit of private goals among individuals and groups" (165). Wilson Carey McWilliams presents Mark Twain's use of comedy in his writings as a specific case in which literature corrects a deficiency in "democratic education" by presenting the comedic figure as an alternative to the dangers of modernity's other heroes, the scientist who controls by technique and the romantic's self-destruction (198). Comedy serves our regime by "unmasking the human pretension to be a whole, to claim to have final answers to the great mysteries" (198). Moreover, McWilliams shows us that Twain employs comedy not to undermine our regime's principles but to find a mode of correction compatible with democratic life. Maureen Whitebrook states that the task of "political literary criticism is to bring out the interrelationship of art and politics within the culture" (6). Art does not simply mirror its culture, but will critique and challenge it by offering alternatives to existing social and political conventions. In this way, art engages in a political task by revealing "political possibilities" heretofore unimagined (6). Novelists are particularly well-situated to examine whether and how the lives of particular people searching for happiness succeed in a liberal community.

⁶⁷Zuckert, "American Novelists," 683.

⁶⁸Zuckert, "American Novelists," 683.

⁶⁹ Zuckert, "American Novelists," 684-88.

Wharton is not Thomas Hobbes, but she considers how the individual satisfies his desires in society by imagining a character, Undine Spragg, with unrestrained desires seeking power after power to fulfill them. Although it may appear initially doubtful whether a novel's contextualized teaching has application beyond the borders of the book, a novel's particularization of character and location is, according to Zuckert, the precise reason why novels excel at exploring political themes. Theory is abstracted unnaturally from the particularity of human experience. Art presents the remedy to theory's defect by depicting particular persons and places and so "'test' theories or general ideas, in effect, by showing what happens to the characters who take these ideas seriously enough to live by them."⁷⁰ Novelists thus allow us to see the consequences and effects of theories applied to particular persons and places. Thus, art, or poetry in the broad sense, is the necessary complement, and sometimes correction, to political theory.

Catherine Zuckert's work, *Natural Right and the American Imagination*, focuses on how American authors have explored our regime's relationship to natural rights and depicted various returns to and exits from the state of nature.⁷¹ In its turn to American

⁷⁰ Zuckert, "American Novelists," 689.

⁷¹ Catherine H. Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy in Novel Form* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1990). See also Howard Mumford Jones, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953). In this unique look at the pursuit of happiness, Jones looks at literature as well as public documents to understand the American regime and the pursuit of happiness. Jones utilizes the writings of literary figures (for example, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William James) on the grounds that they are "sufficiently outstanding observers of American life"; he also makes use of juvenile literature (such as *The Wizard of Oz*), popular magazines, and advertisements (104). Whereas in the past happiness had political, social, or economical meanings, Jones finds, Americans now talk about happiness in the sense of a psychological well-being that depends on the individual's adjustment (with the help of experts) to an environment largely beyond his control. This has been heretofore an unnoticed "semantic shift" in the common usage of happiness. Jones welcomes this shift in meaning, because he believes it marks a more democratic understanding—every individual finds himself in a set of circumstances to which he requires adjustment.

novelists to understand American liberalism, her work is a model for my dissertation. Just as she explores what American novelists teach us about natural rights and the state of nature, I will look at how American novelists explore the political preconditions for happiness, how our political order promotes happiness, and how we may guard against the dangers to happiness arising in our political order. Our novelists differing diagnoses of the pursuit of happiness illustrates the variety of understandings and ways of pursuing happiness.

Beginning in contemporary America, we shall see how in Tom Wolfe's novels economic success and intellectual prowess fail to satisfy our human need for greatness, distinction, and friendship. Wolfe dramatically depicts the downfall of his characters due to their failure to recognize and pursue satisfying human goods. Wolfe shows us the power of society to shape our lives and goals through rewarding certain activities with high status. Wolfe reveals that Americans do not merely pursue wealth per se, but primarily for the status and power it brings. For example, in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Sherman McCoy pursues wealth, but he cares most for the sense of mastery and social prestige it brings him. The pursuit of wealth is connected to more than lust for acquisition. For Wolfe, the greatest threat to the pursuit of happiness is social pressure. Sherman learns that his mastery was illusory and that his social standing depended on the opinion of people who cared very little about him. Status and power prove to be an unstable foundation for happiness. Sherman finds the courage to resist political and social forces bent on depriving him of his freedom for the sake of preserving his liberty and eventually re-claiming his family. In *Bonfire* as well as *A Man in Full* and *I Am*

Charlotte Simmons, Wolfe stresses the importance of finding the courage to stand up to social pressure for the sake of pursuing happiness.

Taking a Christian existential perspective, Walker Percy suggests alternatives to modern life through the “conventionally” unhappy lives of his alienated and lonely protagonists. Percy faults the pursuit of happiness for defining the object of the pursuit. He replaces the pursuit of happiness with the search so as to create a freer foundation for inquiry into the highest human aspirations. In *The Moviegoer*, for example, Binx recognizes the superficiality of the materialistic pursuit of happiness that alienates individuals from each other and from realizing the futility of their pursuit. Binx searches for an alternative to his family’s aristocratic and fatalistic perspective and liberalism’s lowly concern for material well-being that will ennoble and provide meaning to his life. Through his search, Binx partially overcomes his alienation and finds a fellow searcher in his cousin Kate. As I shall show, in *Lost in the Cosmos* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy shows sympathy for the Stoic life of aristocratic honor, which offers a sanctuary from modernity’s baser assumptions about human nature, but ultimately rejects it. Instead, Percy tries to make us aware of our condition as fellow pilgrims and wanderers—a way of life that is not specifically liberal, but possible within a liberal political order.

Edith Wharton brings to light how love of equality detaches individuals from time and place and unleashes endless and restless desires that dissolve the old social classes that salutarily had constrained individual liberty for the effect of creating a coherent and enduring life with others. For Wharton, the pursuit of happiness is an ugly justification for self-gratification. In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton shows Undine Spragg in an

endless, futile pursuit of pure, untroubled pleasure. Not only does Undine's selfishness wreck the lives of her family and child, she fails to find the happiness she wants. In contrast, Newland Archer, in *The Age of Innocence*, sacrifices his deepest desire, because he recognizes his social and paternal duty. In turn, Newland realizes—if not happiness—a deep life satisfaction. Wharton sought ways to resist the detachment and restlessness that are the products of democracy through an appeal to family responsibility and the virtue of moderation that may detract from momentary happiness as it makes possible a more lasting and stable contentment.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Nathaniel Hawthorne turned to America's Puritan past to explore the connection between freedom and privacy, and our need to pursue happiness in association with others. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne depicts how the Puritan community violates Hester Prynne's heart by its public punishment of her private sin and, furthermore, isolates her from society through the badge of the scarlet letter. Yet, if the Puritans practiced excessive social intrusion into individual lives, Hawthorne's contemporary society as depicted in "The Custom-House" sketch that introduces the main story of *The Scarlet Letter* depicts the deficiency in which individuals enjoy little community with each other. Both societies, Hawthorne argues, fail to recognize that the heart's mystery provides the basis of our moral and political freedom. Political health is served by acknowledging the sacredness of the human heart and limiting the reach of society, but also encouraging individuals to form freely private relationships and friendships to mediate the individual's relationship to society as a whole. It is Hawthorne, I shall argue, who provides the more positive view of the

potential of American freedom to allow human happiness—with guidance from artists or poets.

Our novelists, like happiness researchers, observe that Americans pursue material goods excessively and fail to cultivate the social and personal relationships that contribute to well-being, but go further in their inquiry. Moreover, unlike happiness researchers, our novelists engage the reader as a participant in their critique of the pursuit of happiness and offer alternative possibilities for the pursuit of happiness. Since our novelists offer ongoing reflection and conversation about the meaning of happiness and how we might secure it for ourselves and for others, I argue that they provide a model for investigation into the pursuit of happiness that is more compatible with liberalism's commitment to respecting pluralism.

CHAPTER TWO

Tom Wolfe's America

Having made this fame as a journalist in the sixties and seventies for his vivid, literary style of reporting, Tom Wolfe defends his turn to fiction in a *Harper's* article, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel." Wolfe declares American literature anemic for want of "big realistic fictional novel[s]" that would vividly depict America's great post-World War II cities, its turbulent social movements, and other "big, rich, slices of contemporary life."¹ Writing against critics like Lionel Trilling who believe American literature suffers because the United States lacks the robust class sentiments necessary for realistic characters, Wolfe counters that *status* replaces class in post-World War II America, because status is the "essential" way to show the "innermost life of the individual."² Since status replaces class in America, Wolfe argues that American literature will *and should be* different from literature like *Anna Karenina* in which social classes and customs constrain and shape individual lives. In his pursuit of happiness, the American does not experience the exquisite inner anguish

¹ Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel," *Harper's* 279 (November 1989): 45 and 47. According to Wolfe, after World War II, aspiring young American novelists were discouraged from writing realistic novels in the vein as Thackeray, Zola, Dickens, and Sinclair Lewis because such novels were considered (by leading intellectuals) to be contemptibly bourgeois. Moreover, realistic novels were not possible because American life is not real, but, instead, American life is "chaotic, fragmented, random, discontinuous; in a word, *absurd*" (49; italics in original).

² Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," 51. With self-conscious determination, Wolfe writes novels that "portray the individual in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him" (50). The individual cannot be understood abstracted from society, and, in fact, the best way to show the individual's inner person is by depicting how he relates to society. Consequently, depicting how these new status social structures affect the individual is the peculiar task and challenge to the American novelist.

of his European counterpart who rubs up against rigid social boundaries. Nevertheless, social structures have changed—*not disappeared*. Americans strive after status within “statuspheres”—realms of relatively self-contained social groups in which status is accorded by its internal rules—and there are many statuspheres to which individuals can aspire and seek happiness within.³ Each statusphere promises well-being and ideal living and Americans are free to adopt, to judge each group for themselves, and to leave as they choose in their pursuit of happiness.

However, status-seeking and happiness can be in tension. Just as Wolfe notes that social structure has not disappeared in America but altered, he shows that status-seeking Americans face new obstacles to happiness. Individuals, who prove successful at gaining status, often discover that the things that they have pursued for the sake of status do not bring them happiness and, in fact, often prove detrimental to the things that are worthwhile. Free from class jealousies and barriers, Americans enjoy tremendous freedom to choose what and with whom to pursue happiness, but have little preparation to make informed decisions and to resist public pressure. As Tocqueville observes, democratic life tends to weaken the individual’s confidence in his powers of reasoning in comparison to the mass of society.⁴ Without class sentiments to form opinions and feeling isolated and lacking confidence in his ability to reason, the individual follows public opinion. By attaching great status to material possessions and power, American society encourages individuals to seek things that contribute very little to happiness.

³ Tom Wolfe, *The Pump House Gang* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 5.

⁴ Tocqueville writes that “[a]s citizens become more equal and alike, the penchant of each to believe blindly a certain man or class diminishes. The disposition to believe the mass is augmented, and more and more it is opinion that leads the world” in *Democracy in America*, II.I.2. Tocqueville further writes of the individual that “when he comes to view the sum of those like him and places himself at the side of this great body, he is immediately overwhelmed by his own insignificance and his weakness.”

Given the freedom to join and leave social groups, Wolfe argues that most of all individuals need the courage to resist the crowd and strike out on one's own. Finding courage is not always so easy and Wolfe explores how individuals may find sources of support for courage. As I shall show, Wolfe depicts this problem in his three novels, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, *A Man in Full*, and *I Am Charlotte Simmons* and searches for ways and resources compatible with American liberalism for the individual to stand up for himself.

Most scholarly literature on Wolfe's fictional writings tends to be piecemeal treatments. Virtually nothing has been written on all three novels in a systematic fashion that attempts to draw on one single theme, as I will do in this chapter. A substantial number of critics dismiss Wolfe's fiction as bad writing, far from realistic, bitterly sarcastic, full of one-dimensional characters, stereotypical characterizations of women, minorities and ethnicities, overblown, bombastic, and with excessive punctuation.⁵ Not all of these criticisms are erroneous. Rejecting Wolfe's claim to write a realistic novel, Brock Clarke calls his novels "plodding, self-pleased, cartoonish."⁶ Instead of faithfully representing social structures, James N. Stull argues that Wolfe manipulates and structures social arrangements like a "master gamesman."⁷ More thoughtfully, and

⁵ William McKeen notes that a reviewer of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* troubled to count its 2, 343 exclamation points in *Tom Wolfe*, Twayne's United States Authors Series (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 125.

⁶ Brock Clark, "The Novel is Dead (Long Live the Novel)," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 82 (Summer): 165.

⁷ James N. Stull, "The Cultural Gamesmanship of Tom Wolfe," *Journal of American Culture* 14 (Fall): 25. Irving Malin makes the similar charge in a review of *A Man in Full* that Wolfe "manipulates the whole show" in *Hollins Critic* 36 (June): 16. Although examining only nonfiction works, Lisa Stokes argues that close and thoughtful examination of Wolfe's narrative style reveals that Wolfe does not manipulate his subjects, but rather "[n]arrator Wolfe respects his subjects' integrity as autonomous narrative forces" in "Tom Wolfe's Narratives as Stories of Growth," *Journal of American Culture* 14 (1991): 19.

unlike most critics of Wolfe, Rand Richards Cooper posits that Wolfe successfully chronicles status, but that Wolfe's writings (nonfiction and fiction) suffer from being "a hundred jazzy variations on the homey theme of keeping up with the Joneses."⁸ More pointedly, Cooper argues that Wolfe reduces characterization to a technique and, as a consequence, fails to reveal a whole person since the complexity of his character "lies largely in what they wear, buy, and covet."⁹ But, as I shall demonstrate below, Wolfe's characters are more than aggregates of consumer preferences driven to spend and own competitively, but often learn—the hard way—that material consumption, as one of the most conspicuous and typically American ways to achieve status, does not satisfy and that they must exercise their freedom to look for happiness.

Friendlier commentators on Wolfe's writings have emphasized how his heroes have been dissatisfied or led astray in their quest for status and have left these social groups to seek nobler goals. In the tradition of Joseph Campbell's writings, Gary Konas argues that the subjects of Wolfe's nonfiction writings are like literary heroes that undergo the classic rite and journey of mythic heroes.¹⁰ Drawing predominately on Wolfe's nonfiction works and *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Sheri F. Crawford argues that Wolfe's heroes are "outlaw gentlemen" who demonstrate their freedom and individuality by turning away from the crowd often as a "lone adventurer," nonconformist, or heretic to pursue a higher "calling."¹¹

⁸ Rand Richards Cooper, "Tom Wolfe, Material Boy," *Commonweal* (7 May 1999): 13.

⁹ Cooper, 15.

¹⁰ Gary Konas, "Travelling 'Furthur' with Tom Wolfe's Heroes," *Journal of Popular Culture* 28 (1994): 177-92.

¹¹ Sheri F. Crawford, "Tom Wolfe: Outlaw Gentleman," *Journal of American Culture* 13 (Summer): 39.

A similar strand of interpretation of Wolfe, especially relevant to my own work, links Wolfe's writings on status to the American pursuit of happiness. Carol McNamara and Ronald Weber have understood Wolfe's writings to be engaged in uncovering the American pursuit of happiness and its relationship to status. McNamara links Wolfe's narrative pattern to the pursuit of happiness in her article describing how Wolfe's depiction of American freedom serves the pursuit of happiness. McNamara observes that Wolfe shows us both "traditional social, economic, and political elites and the emergence of subcultures through which individuals seek self-expression and distinction outside of the traditional status structure."¹² Wolfe's heroes come to realize that traditional social structures are deadening, restraining, dissatisfying, but eventually they find freedom in a social subgroup or alternative society. McNamara terms this characteristic turning of Wolfe's characters "transcendence" in which some (though not all) characters "either escape or rise above the expectations of others in a way that transcends mere status and achieves true freedom."¹³

Commenting only on Wolfe's nonfiction works, Ronald Weber argues that Wolfe documents a "happiness explosion" for the general population caused by the rapid infusion of wealth into all levels of society in post World War II America.¹⁴ Consequently, the lower classes had discretionary wealth for the first time and quickly freed themselves from the tastes and pursuits of the elites so as to follow "their peculiar styles of life, styles that up to that time had been practically invisible in the society as a

¹² Carol McNamara, "The Pursuit of Happiness, American Style: Tom Wolfe's Study of Status and Freedom," *Perspectives on Political Science* 34 (Winter): 16.

¹³ McNamara, "The Pursuit of Happiness, American Style," 16.

¹⁴ Ronald Weber, "Tom Wolfe's Happiness Explosion," *Journal of Popular Culture* 8 (Summer): 71.

whole.”¹⁵ Wolfe, according to Weber, rejects community guided ways of life, because there are fewer winners and more losers among traditional society. The collapse of traditional society allows for “the celebration of the comic, pleasure-seeking, self-centered modes of the happiness explosion.”¹⁶ The great achievement of post-war prosperity is an increase in individual happiness, because more individuals are able to get what they want and live as they want.

Weber is right that Wolfe, on the whole, believes that post-war American prosperity has been a boon to the vast majority of individuals who were previously too poor to live much beyond subsistence. Some measure of wealth is instrumental to the pursuit of happiness if only that the individual enjoys social mobility and can to follow his lights as opposed to the elite’s tastes and paternalistic guidance. But Weber leaves us with Wolfe unreservedly praising all idiosyncratic pursuits of happiness, and the claim that prosperity ushers in more happiness.¹⁷ Weber misses, as McNamara does not, that Wolfe shows us individuals leaving one statusphere in favor of another status group rather than striking out as a lone individual. Wolfe’s heroes long for companionship and so seek out alternative communities. Moreover, Wolfe’s fictional works show that political freedom and prosperity are useless if individuals do not find the internal resolve to leave unhappy status groups. For Wolfe, the good news is that American political freedom is real and meaningful, because it means that individuals are free to leave one social group and pursue happiness with others in another.

¹⁵ Weber, 72.

¹⁶ Weber, 78.

¹⁷ Even so, Weber may be right about Wolfe’s early and nonfiction works, but this is why it is important to consider Wolfe’s later and fictional writings.

The Bonfire of the Vanities

In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Sherman McCoy is the top bond salesman at Pierce & Pierce, has an enviable \$2.6 million dollar Park Avenue apartment, and has a wife and child. His success with his job, home, and family has not made him happy. Believing himself to be deserving of greater satisfaction, Sherman wants more and, in so doing, loses everything, including his wife and child whom he comes to realize are dearer than he knew. How Sherman McCoy had everything, lost everything, and gained his soul (so to speak) chronicles the disastrous results for the individual's private pursuit of happiness when liberal societies cease connecting status to virtue. In this section, I will explore how he failed to acquire moral rectitude from his father and discuss how his false sense of freedom based on material success leads to his ruin. Finally, I will argue that at the end of the novel, we glimpse at Sherman's transformation from a contemptible and weak money-maker to a more heroic fighter able to resist social pressures that would deprive him of his freedom.

Sherman is the son of a well-respected, part-of-the-establishment New York lawyer, but also is a 1980s Wall Street bond salesman. He is the offspring of the lingering and exhausted remains of the old solidly WASP establishment that supported a tighter connection between virtue and status, but he also belongs to the new social order of the 1980s that rejected traditional virtues and sentiments (such as duty, responsibility, dislike of ostentation), gave free reign to the previously constrained greed and private ambition, and enjoyed the successes of ruthless individualism and self-interest. On the way back from the Kennedy airport, Sherman and his mistress, Maria, take a wrong turn back to Manhattan, and find themselves in the Bronx. Upon finding a tire blocking the entrance back onto the highway, Sherman gets out of his \$48,000 dollar Mercedes

roadster to remove the tire while two young black men approach him—the taller imposing one ask if he needs help. Fearing that the tire on the on-ramp is a plot to con him, Sherman throws the tire at him and leaps back into his Mercedes that Maria is now driving. Backing the car up, Maria hits the skinny black youth and quickly departs for the highway.

Since she was the driver, Maria convinces Sherman that they ought not to report the incident and Sherman agrees to keep silent. However, the black youth, Henry Lamb, is hospitalized and soon succumbs to a coma. The search to find the undoubtedly white and rich owner of a Mercedes roadster that fled the scene after hitting a young black honor student from the Bronx is manipulated by a series of self-interested parties for the sake of private gain and benefit—such as Albert Vogel, a defense attorney, Peter Fallow, an alcoholic British journalist, Reverend Bacon, a black activist, and Abe Weiss, the Bronx District Attorney. Sherman is accurately identified as the owner of the Mercedes and hides the fact that his mistress was with him and that she was the driver. In the ensuing public and legal battle, Sherman is vilified (and glamorized) by the press, he is fired, his wife learns of his infidelity, he is arrested, indicted, and taken to trial. Sherman becomes a plaything of other individuals' private motivations. But the courthouse system presents an alternative liberal model for Sherman to his bond trading room. Abandoned by his former supports, Sherman becomes transformed from a cowardly, self-interested, snobby, contemptible individual into a fighter, who will no longer be manipulated by others.

Sherman McCoy is a self-described “Master of the Universe,” which is a name he appropriated from a set of “lurid” Nordic muscular dolls belonging to his daughter,

Campbell.¹⁸ The phrase came to Sherman's mind one day after he nonchalantly performed a sale that resulted in a "\$50,000 commission, *just like that*" (italics in original) and he realized that he was one of a few on Wall Street for whom "no limit [existed] whatsoever!"¹⁹ Sherman's overweening sense of mastery comes from his ability to earn large sums of money easily and quickly, the apparent limitless potential for acquisition, and his status as one of a select few similarly situated as "Masters of the Universe." Sherman regarded himself as one of "that breed whose natural destiny it was...to have what they wanted!"²⁰ He imagines that his wealth, his job, his reputation, his family are secure in his control and unassailable through changes in fortune. And this sense of having achieved unassailable security blinds Sherman to the precariousness of his material possessions. Sherman's desire for more—an undefined, unlimited longing for increase—reveals how little satisfaction his possessions bring him. Given the paltry pleasure he derives from his things, he labors continually to acquire more to demonstrate and maintain his (supposed) mastery. Sherman's desire for accumulation eventually leads to his downfall and exposes how flimsy his claim to power is.

Although the hit and run triggers Sherman's ruin and heightens the intensity in which he loses everything, he is no tragic victim of fortune's wheel—nor, as I shall later

¹⁸ Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Dial Press Trade Paperback, 2005) 13. Sherman's self-description as a "Master of the Universe" is no isolated event in the book., Wolfe has Sherman mentally invoke the phrase throughout the novel, usually to express vainglorious self-importance ("He was part of the pulverizing might of Pierce & Pierce, Masters of the Universe. The audacity of it all was breathtaking," 68) or indignation (annoyed with his father Sherman thinks to himself "you and your two hundred Wall Street lawyers were nothing but functionaries for Masters of the Universe" 223). Or Wolfe uses it to comic effect so as to show Sherman's lack of mastery ("Hidden behind the toilet door, the Master of the Universe began ransacking the newspaper at a furious clip, page by filthy page" 132). Although Sherman misses the irony of reminding himself of a child's plaything, we the readers do not, and realize long before he does that his mastery is an illusion.

¹⁹ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 13.

²⁰ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 75.

show, is he without resources and freedom to benefit from the lessons his downfall teaches him. Wolfe shows how Sherman is responsible for his rapid disgrace. Success as a bond salesman leads Sherman to believe that his mastery is unassailable and so he takes foolish risks in various domains of his life that unravel and reveal how little self-control he possesses. Under the thinnest of excuses, Sherman pretends to walk the dog so as to visit with his mistress. An expensive, intricate, and risky sale of French gold backed bonds known as the Giscard backfires on him and precipitates his financial ruin—a great blow to Sherman’s top notch sales savvy.

Being the number one bond salesman gives Sherman immense pleasure, and he enjoys the frantic intensity of the sales room where in the fray of making money he can ignore the rest of his life and indulge in his fictional persona as a “Master of the Universe.”²¹ In the bond trading room of Pierce & Pierce, Sherman experiences the thrill of being a risk taker, and after a bold sell, he compares his fellow masters of the universe to “victorious warriors after the fray.”²² But this is a false sense of courage and accomplishment. As Sheri F. Crawford observes, Sherman “only takes risks and gambles with other people’s money,” and, as a bond salesman, his job is really a means to someone else’s end.²³ Wolfe emphasizes this point by showing Sherman trying to impress his young daughter, Campbell by explaining his job. His attempt is frustrated,

²¹ In support of Sherman’s enjoyment of his profession: “Masters of the Universe! The roar filled Sherman’s soul with hope, confidence, esprit de corps, and righteousness” (59). Wolfe tells us frankly that “[o]rdinarily, as soon as [Sherman] entered the bond trading room and the glare from the plate glass hit him and the roar of a legion of young men crazed by greed and ambition engulfed him, everything else in his life fell away and the world become the little green symbols that slid across the black screens of the computer terminals” (129).

²² Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 69.

²³ Sheri F. Crawford, “Tom Wolfe: Outlaw Gentleman,” *Journal of American Culture* 13 (1990): 39-50.

because his job cannot be explained in terms of what he makes, how many subordinates he commands, or a common public good (like the building of hospitals and roads).²⁴ Wolfe's examples highlight how Sherman does not produce a product, does not lead and take responsibility for other people by exercising leadership, and does not engage in a common enterprise with some sort of public benefit. Sherman is a money-maker engaged in a "mad pursuit of personal happiness through material security."²⁵ He becomes increasingly annoyed with his father who holds little esteem for bond trading and his wife who takes over the task of explaining to Campbell her father's occupation by comparing the selling of bonds to the selling of slices of cake when bond traders keep the crumbs for themselves. Sherman's utter helplessness to describe in a flattering and impressive way to his daughter his occupation brings him painfully close to confronting the insignificance of his profession.

The greatest example of Sherman's lack of personal restraint is his extra-marital affair that precipitates his ruin. The so-called "Master of the Universe" lacks mastery over his own sexual impulses. Animated both by a love of acquisition and a sense of entitlement, Sherman McCoy feels justified in pursuing an affair with Maria Ruskin whom Wolfe describes as a "frisky young animal" with a cloying Southern accent.²⁶ The basis of Sherman's sense of entitlement is that as a "young man still in the season of the rising sap, [he] deserve[s] *more* from time to time, when the spirit moves [him]" (italics in original).²⁷ Sherman searches unsuccessfully for a convenient justification for

²⁴ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 221-23.

²⁵ Crawford, "Outlaw Gentleman," 39.

²⁶ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 75.

²⁷ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 13.

indulging in his unrestrained desires so as to allay his conscience about cheating on his wife. In so doing, Sherman indulges in self-deception. Judy, his aging wife, is no longer as attractive as she had been and Sherman thinks that it is “[n]ot her fault...*But not mine, either!*” (italics in original).²⁸ After a fight with Judy who rightfully suspects that Sherman visited his mistress, he reflects that he did not want much, compared to what he, a Master of the Universe, should

rightfully have...If Middle Age wishes the continued support and escort of a Master of the Universe, then she must allow him the precious currency he has earned, which is youth and beauty and juicy jugs and loamy loins.²⁹

At bottom, Sherman is cruel and irresponsible towards his wife towards whom he apparently does not believe he owes fidelity.

Belonging to New York’s established class further exacerbates Sherman’s sense of entitlement. Sherman lacks the earned moral fiber that his father’s Knickerbocker class had, but clings to the old social class structure and prejudices without having any of the old WASP establishment virtues—namely, that responsibility and self-control lead to and support personal freedom. Sherman’s father, a lawyer known in his heyday (and by Sherman still) as the Lion of Dunning Sponget, towers over his imagination and provides a foil to Sherman’s own conduct. The Lion attempted to imbue his son with personal responsibility, self-restraint, and sympathy with all classes by, for example, riding the subway on principle. In contrast, Sherman takes a taxi every day.³⁰ The Lion failed to

²⁸ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 12.

²⁹ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 68-69.

³⁰ “If you could go breezing down FDR Drive in a taxi, then why file into the trenches of the urban wars?” (54).

pass on to his son these virtues.³¹ But Sherman is not so much a part of the old New York Knickerbocker establishment that he appears to be. His father, in fact, is an outsider from Tennessee and son of a lower class Southerner. Wolfe tells us little about Sherman's grandfather, William Sherman McCoy, other than he came from Knoxville, Tennessee to New York where he prospered so that his son, Sherman's father, John Campbell McCoy, could attend Yale Law School and marry into New York high society. Whereas John McCoy used to take his son, Sherman, to visit Knoxville and see where their family started, Sherman is self-conscious of his family's lack of pedigree and recalls flushed with indignation how his childhood rival, Pollard Browning, used to call McCoy a hick surname in reference to the feuding Hatfields and McCoys. Wolfe only hints at the Lion's pretense of playing the part of the old social establishment when he describes Sherman's mother as "an aristocrat, much more of one than his father, with all his dedication to being one."³² The unintentional lesson Sherman did receive from his father, unfortunately, was the importance of seeking status and achieving the right class. Sherman misses how as his father ascended socially by merit of his prudential and responsible undertakings and not from entitlement or a sense of desert.

During his prime, the Lion occupied one of the most impressive corner offices with a view of the New York Harbor. However, as Wolfe takes care to tell us, as partners aged, they were expected quietly and in a dignified manner to relinquish the best offices

³¹ Commentators on the relationship between Sherman and his father typically flatten John McCoy's character to be simply representative of the WASP establishment. See Crawford, "Tom Wolfe: Outlaw Gentleman," and Carol McNamara, "Men and Money in Tom Wolfe's America," 128. Yet they overlook how the Lion must have been quite a social climber himself to have been the son of a Knoxville nobody and so successfully ingratiated himself with the old New York social structure to become the well-respected, aristocratic lawyer that we see in the novel.

³² Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 218.

for the use of the lawyers entering their prime.³³ In contrast, Wolfe tells us that few of the men populating the bond trading room of Pierce & Pierce were over forty.³⁴ Sherman is thirty-eight and shows no signs of recognizing a time in which he might quietly step aside to make way for the ambitions of younger men. Sherman views the younger men as threats to his own standing. Unlike his son, the Lion was scrupulously financially responsible from the beginning of his life to the end. The Lion and his wife had started out in an old house in need of renovation on Seventy-third Street (an unpopular block at the time) and “[kept] a stern eye on costs every step of the way, and [took] pride in what a proper house they had created for a relatively modest amount.”³⁵ In his retirement, the Lion secured sufficient capital to keep the family home on Seventy-third Street and another house on Long Island, and to maintain his wife and himself in refined (but not ostentatious) circumstances for the remainder of their lives.³⁶ Sherman reflects that his father would be “appalled” at the amount he spent and borrowed for his apartment and “wounded at the thought of how his endlessly repeated lessons concerning duty, debt, ostentation, and proportion had whistled straight through his son’s skull.”³⁷ These thoughts do not rouse much shame or remorse in Sherman. He lives in an enviable \$2.6 million dollar Park Avenue apartment for which he had taken a \$1.8 million dollar loan for the sake of decorating. His yearly expenses include (but are not limited to) \$252,000 a year for paying back the loan, \$44,400 for the apartment’s maintenance fees, \$37,000

³³ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 414.

³⁴ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 56.

³⁵ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 54.

³⁶ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 418.

³⁷ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 54.

for entertaining, \$65,000 for his wife Judy to keep the apartment fashionably decorated, \$4,000 for Campbell's modest birthday party with only one carnival ride, and \$62,000 for the servants' pay.³⁸ Sherman knows that he spends well in excess of what he earns, but is unable, or more precisely, unwilling to drastically reduce his spending.

Wolfe depicts the bond trading room as cold, individualizing, and exhibiting the brutally competitive ways of commercial life possible in a liberal regime in which self-interest and private pursuit are fueled unchecked by a sense of entitlement and limitless capacity for mastery and acquisition. Indeed, Wolfe shows us a dangerous side to the pursuit of happiness—that, as a purely individual activity, it encourages selfishness and brutality toward others. Indeed, the elite educated young men working the in trading room are like animals in a stockyard. Despite overlooking the finest vista, the New York Harbor goes unnoticed by the young men who "mov[ed] about in an agitated manner and sweat[ed] early in the morning."³⁹ The trading room is marked by a "roar, like the roar of a mob."⁴⁰ These young men have been educated at the most elite schools in the United States and the roar, Wolfe reveals to us, comes from them shouting, peppered with much profanity, at their phones. Wolfe tells us that the roar is "the sound of well-educated young white men baying for money on the bond market."⁴¹ Crazed with greed and fueled by the pursuit of private interest, a generation of America's best and brightest's only mutual acknowledgements of their colleagues are their raised voices—voices clamoring to be heard over one another. This scene is not simply an indictment of Wall Street

³⁸ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 133.

³⁹ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 56.

⁴⁰ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 55.

⁴¹ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 56.

greed, but also a criticism of America's elite universities at which these young men were regaled with stories of outstanding wealth made in trading rooms and where they memorized the motto: "*Make it now!*" (italics in original).⁴²

Furthermore, the Pierce & Pierce bond room is a society based on the barest of mutual self-interest. Although bond salesmen receive base salaries of \$120,000 a year, they expect the vast majority of their income to come from commissions and profit-sharing. After Pierce & Pierce takes its share, the remainder is divided amongst the bond salesmen. At first, this may seem like an admirably liberal way of channeling self-interest for common benefit, but this policy actually leads the salesmen to act less like co-workers and more like a room of individuals whose interests momentarily align. They sell bonds together in the same room and share earnings, but this kind of mutual self-interest fails to encourage comradeship or even civil relationships. They make use of each other for their own benefit. Under the exterior of working together for impressive sales, each one is ready to strike against his fellow bond salesmen for the sake of self-advancement. As the top salesmen, Sherman "occupied a moral eminence."⁴³ Instead of using his status to be a good leader, Sherman uses it to crush and humiliate others. Sherman angrily and publicly insults, humiliates, and compels co-worker Ferdinand Arguello to put away a racing form. As a final example of the bond room's corrosive influence on human relationships, Sherman distances himself from his old college friend, Rawlie Thorpe, during a meeting with his superiors so as not to be associated with someone who cracked a joke about their superiors. The bond room is a model of vicious

⁴² Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 57.

⁴³ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 59.

self-love in which individuals align in common activity momentarily and guardedly to further their interests.

In contrast, Wolfe presents the courthouse system as an alternative to the bond room—a very different model of a society based on self-interest. The courthouse system allows for a greater level of personal responsibility, principled behavior, loyalty, and integrity, although as part of a liberal society, it does not ensure virtuous individual conduct. The courthouse system, as Sherman’s lawyer, Tommy Killian explains, operates according to the Favor bank, because “[i]n criminal law there’s a lotta gray areas, and you gotta operate in ‘em.”⁴⁴ The judges, lawyers, court officials and everyone else involved in the courthouse grant each other favors “[b]ecause everyone in the courthouse believes in a saying: ‘What goes around comes around.’ That means if you don’t take care a me today, I won’t take care a you tomorrow.”⁴⁵ Really big favors are called contracts and honoring a contract is nearly sacrosanct (“[y]ou have to make good on contracts”).⁴⁶ By making contracts central to the justice system, Wolfe juxtaposes its “norms” to those of the bond room. The bond salesmen falsely believe that their fortunes can only improve and view each other as competitors. The bond salesmen work with their fellow salesmen only in the present case with no future assurance of mutual assistance. In contrast, the courthouse system encourages a more long-term perspective among its participants so that they give favors in the hopes of securing future favors. Moreover, as Killian indicates, in the courthouse system, the members are aware of the fragility of good fortune and the need for mutual assistance.

⁴⁴ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 373.

⁴⁵ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 373.

⁴⁶ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 373.

Considering one's long term interests is classically liberal. The courthouse system relies on individuals seeing their interest fulfilled in the long term and in common, but it also needs virtues, like courage and loyalty. These virtues are not created by the system, but they are brought to it and can become part of the informal culture of the system. Although the Irish were a waning population, their influence on the police department remained and "[a]ll the cops turned Irish."⁴⁷ The Irish, who had influenced the Police Department and the Homicide Bureau, "were stone courageous" and their "loyalty was a monolith, indivisible."⁴⁸ Wolfe tells us that their "bravery was not the bravery of the lion but the bravery of the donkey."⁴⁹ The bravery of the donkey is stubbornly standing fast and being "willing to fight."⁵⁰ Loyalty means standing by one of your own. The code of the donkey was not impervious, but "the game had to be pretty far gone before the Irish started looking out for Number One."⁵¹ By the end of the novel, Sherman has embraced the code of the donkey and shows himself ready to fight.

Sherman's only hope to escape conviction is a cassette tape of a conversation between Maria and himself that reveals that she was the driver of the car (a fact that she had denied in her grand jury testimony). Sherman himself did not record this tape, but for a recorded conversation to be admissible as evidence, it must belong to him.⁵² So Sherman lies under oath that the tape is his, and the judge dismisses the indictment because the tape reveals that Maria lied under oath. A riot erupts in the court room

⁴⁷ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 348.

⁴⁸ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 102 and 348.

⁴⁹ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 348.

⁵⁰ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 348.

⁵¹ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 348.

⁵² The tape was illegally recorded by the landlord of the apartment.

instigated by a large crowd of Reverend Bacon's demonstrators against a small party mainly consisting of the judge, Myron Kovitsky, Sherman's lawyer, Tommy Killian, and Sherman. To the dismay of the court officers, his lawyer, and the judge, Sherman starts throwing punches and, perhaps by his evident earnestness and willing to fight, the crowd of demonstrators retreat. Although Sherman wins this round, he still faces prosecution and a re-trial.

Favor Bank as an institution does not ensure just conduct among all participants in the courthouse and cannot constrain the more ambitious and influential as the contrast between Larry Kramer and Abe Weiss illustrates. Individuals like Larry Kramer and Abe Weiss, act outside of the courthouse system to secure their vainglorious, immoderate desires. Kramer believes he deserves more from life than his cramped apartment, dowdy wife, and low paying job. In an attempt to imitate powerful persons like Sherman, Kramer decides to take what he wants and tries to have an affair with a jury member.⁵³ Yet, as a relatively unimportant figure in the courthouse system, his plot to gain a rent-controlled apartment (as a love-nest) is eventually exposed and he is removed from the case due to misconduct. On the other hand, Weiss, the District Attorney, suffers no ill fate for his reprehensible actions and gains the re-election he wants so badly. For example, Killian makes a contract with Bernie Fitzgibbon, the chief of the Homicide Bureau, that Sherman's arrest will be private. Weiss circumvents Fitzgibbons' contract and turns the arrest into a media spectacle to enhance his image for re-election. In as much as it is based on honoring contracts, the courthouse system institutionally

⁵³ Kramer struggles with his identity as a liberal Jew and the department's Irish machismo that, alongside courage and loyalty, encourages callousness and the use of racial slurs. When Kramer shows shock at gruesome crime scene, an Irish detective reproaches his shock with sarcasm and Kramer "made a point of being Irish" at crime scenes (181). Shortly thereafter, Kramer shies from using a racial slur thinking to himself that "[h]e didn't want to be that Irish" (183). Kramer fails to resolve these tensions.

encourages and reinforces personal integrity to a point. It is an incomplete system that requires that the individual choose to be virtuous.

The novel's epilogue is an article by Overton Holmes, Jr. in *The New York Times* written a year later. Overton reports that Sherman's legal battle has continued, but that he has dramatically changed. Sherman disavows connection to Wall Street and Park Avenue, calls himself a "professional defendant," and dresses in "open-necked sport shirt, khaki pants, and hiking shoes" so as to be ready for jail although he has not been convicted of a crime.⁵⁴ Short on funds, Sherman legally represents himself (although his former lawyer publicly supports him in his case) and maintains his innocence. Judy has left Sherman and moved to the Mid-west, but is reported to have attended Sherman's latest arraignment where Sherman "smiled slightly, and raised his left hand in a clenched-fist salute."⁵⁵ The meaning is unknown to Overton Holmes, Jr., but previously Sherman revealed that early in his marriage with Judy when he left for work on Wall Street in the morning that he raised his fist in the manner of the Black Power movement to signal to her his freedom from Wall Street.⁵⁶

Many commentators on *The Bonfire of the Vanities* agree that the novel's ending is dissatisfying and also reveals that Wolfe has left the reader without a heroic character. Frank Conroy claims that Wolfe unconvincingly tries to show that Sherman is a changed man, but the book leaves the reader with an "odd aftertaste."⁵⁷ Liam Kennedy maintains

⁵⁴ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 636.

⁵⁵ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 637.

⁵⁶ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 69 and 596. At the time, Sherman enjoyed discussing with her that "while he worked *on* Wall Street, he was not *of* Wall Street and was only *using* Wall Street." (69; italics in original). Wolfe twice recalls this habit in the novel and the second occasion will be discussed below.

⁵⁷ Frank Conroy, "Urban Rats in Fashion's Maze," *The New York Times Book Review*, 1 November 1987, p.1.

that the story of Sherman McCoy's downfall is "a cautionary tale for white, middle-class males."⁵⁸ Sheri F. Crawford says that Sherman is "Wolfe's first anti-hero."⁵⁹ In another article, Crawford acknowledges that in an interview Wolfe named Sherman a hero, but dismisses it. She notes that the only evidence for Sherman's heroism is "an unconvincing clenched fist."⁶⁰ Carol McNamara argues that since almost all of the characters do not get what they deserve, the novel's ending "seems to be intentionally unsatisfying."⁶¹ Moreover, McNamara argues that Sherman learns nothing from his experience and his raised fist signals "a mere nostalgic reversion to the days in the village with Judy," because he fails to realize that the politics the Black Power fist represent ("mindless liberalism") are the sort that caused his ruin.⁶² In short, she concludes that "Sherman is still not his own man."⁶³ Although the charge of an unsatisfactory conclusion and lack of heroism are weighty ones, I argue that the evidence supports a less disheartening and more hopeful conclusion—one that indicates that Wolfe both criticizes and praises liberalism.

Although the black power salute arises from their days of political activism and life in the village, Sherman continued to use it to communicate with his wife after he begins working on Wall Street to indicate, as Wolfe tells us, that his "heart and soul

⁵⁸ Liam Kennedy, "'It's the Third World Down There!'" : Urban Decline and (Post)National Mythologies in *Bonfire of the Vanities*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 43 (1997): 108.

⁵⁹ Crawford, "Outlaw Gentlemen," 48.

⁶⁰ Crawford, "Rebel-Doodle Dandy," *Journal of American Culture* 14 (1991): 13-18. Crawford continues that "McCoy's vacillation matches the Hamlet-style procrastination."

⁶¹ Carol McNamara, "Men and Money in Tom Wolfe's America," in *Seers and Judges: American Literature as Political Philosophy*, ed. by Christine Dunn Henderson (Lanham, MD, Lexington Books: 2002), 132.

⁶² McNamara, "Men and Money," 132.

⁶³ McNamara, "Men and Money," 132.

would never belong to it” and that he “would use it and rebel and break with it.”⁶⁴ When he uses it again to communicate with his wife in court, at the height of his trial and crushing public smear, Sherman tries to salvage his marriage. By reminding Judy of their past, he sorrowfully tells her that he succumbed to the values of Wall Street, but now that he has lost his job there may be a new opportunity for them. Still stinging, from Sherman’s infidelity, his lie about the accident, and the public humiliation accompanying the trial, Judy forgives him, but says that forgiveness does not change anything he has done. Words fail Sherman, because there is nothing in his character or past conduct that he can draw on to show her otherwise. Deeds—demonstration of change—are needed. In the year’s time Sherman has lived a changed life in which he is free of Wall Street and fighting against those who sought to capitalize on his downfall. Such deeds might convince and inspire her to rejoin Sherman and become truly the countercultural pair that they had falsely fancied that they were in their youth. Although Wolfe shows us that Judy returns to see Sherman in the courtroom and undoubtedly understands the meaning of Sherman’s raised fist, we cannot know if Judy is willing to make amends with Sherman. We do know, however, that in the year’s time Judy has not filed for divorce (the reporter Holmes surely would have mentioned their pending divorce in his article). In the absence of further evidence, we may only conclude that the possibility of reconciliation remains open to Sherman and Judy.

In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Wolfe sets up Sherman McCoy as a character ripe for a tragic fall; it is a spectacular fall, but not a tragedy. In classic tragedies, hubris blinds individuals from true self-knowledge and fools them into thinking that they are freer than they really are. Only after losing everything can tragic heroes come to self-

⁶⁴ Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 596.

knowledge though it is too late to make amends for their misdeeds. In Oedipus's case, he must trade eyesight for inward sight. Although not the master of the universe he thought he was—that kind of freedom is illusory—Sherman discovers that he is free in a meaningful way to take charge of his life, and, consequently, Wolfe does not show us the end of the story for Sherman. Sherman's future is uncertain and we cannot know how his legal battles will end or if Judy and he will repair their marriage.

The last glimpse of Sherman comes through the eyes of *The New York Times*' ostentatiously named reporter Overton Holmes, Jr. Overton is presumably as orthodox as the nation's paper of record. In the epilogue, Sherman cuts a poor figure in *The New York Times* article that diligently reports his unorthodox behavior (wearing hiking shoes, legally representing himself, calling himself a professional defendant) and seems loony. Dropping out of the traditional social structure will appear ridiculous. No longer will Sherman chase after wealth to bring him status. Instead, he will fight within the legal system to maintain his freedom and hopes to regain standing with his wife and child. Sherman's discovery of his low, but solid animal instincts to fight for survival is not Wolfe's final word on finding ways to counter society's misleading pursuits that fail to satisfy. For consideration of how liberal regimes can make use of pre-liberal support for courage, we must turn to Wolfe's *A Man in Full*. As we shall see, Wolfe does not throw all higher human aspirations on the bonfire.

A Man in Full

If *The Bonfire of the Vanities* leaves Sherman McCoy with too few options and resources for re-establishing a more noble existence compatible with liberal principles, *A Man in Full* supplies the correction. Commentators have discussed how Wolfe

investigates the effect of liberalism on manliness and its related classic virtue, courage, and how he presents a case for stoicism.⁶⁵ Other critics have been quick to note that Wolfe does not merely present classic stoicism, but stoicism modified by Christianity to make it more charitable.⁶⁶ Indeed, Wolfe uses stoicism to introduce pre-liberal notions of manliness, honor and courage and show how liberalism needs the support of these virtues. Stoicism supports virtues that liberal regimes need for the sake of resisting the materialistic tendencies of American life by giving support to the individual's soul—that there is a part of the person that does not have a price and cannot be compromised. Yet, Wolfe also makes stoicism more other-regarding, but not by formally mixing it with Christian concepts. Instead, Wolfe understands liberalism's commitment to prevent that abuse of another's rights and person to mean that there must be courageous individuals willing to protect the weak, the friendless, and the defenseless. As we shall see, helping the weak, friendless, and defenseless starts with befriending them. *A Man in Full* has a number of complex storylines, but I shall focus below on Charlie's and Conrad's, whose storylines are relevant to my analysis.

Charlie Croker is an aging Atlanta real estate businessman, founder of Croker Global, owner of a Gulfstream Five aircraft that is mostly put to use for his commuting between Atlanta and his plantation. He writes off in his taxes his plantation as an “experimental farm” in Baker County called “Turpmtine.” At the “Turpmtine” plantation, he enjoys quail shooting and keeps fifty-nine horses valued at \$4.7 million dollars and

⁶⁵ See Mary Ann Glendon, “Who’s Afraid of Tom Wolfe?” *First Things* 95 (1999): 13-14; Carol McNamara, “Men and Money in Tom Wolfe’s America” and John O’Sullivan, “Honor Amid the Ruins” *American Spectator* 32 (1999): 64-68.

⁶⁶ See P. J. O’Rourke, “God and Man in Full,” *Policy Review* 94 (1999): 73-77 and Peter Augustine Lawler, “Real Men Prove Darwin Wrong Again,” *Homeless and at Home in America: Evidence for the Dignity of the Human Soul in Our Time and Place* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007): 78-89.

one stud, “First Draw” worth \$3 million. Most of the “Turpentine” employees are the descendents of slaves, and they call Charlie “Cap’m Charlie.” During his life, Charlie has enjoyed much success, but now he is in his decline physically and he also feels out of touch with the more technical side of business concerns. Charlie is “highly dependent” on Wismer Stroock (more commonly known as The Wiz), a financial officer, to take care of understanding the financial particulars of operating businesses.⁶⁷ He fears that his business empire, Croker Global Corporation, will also become a victim of stronger business forces.

When the novel opens, Charlie is unable to pay back \$160 million in loans for which he is personally responsible to his six lenders for the building of Croker Concourse. Croker Concourse is a virtually empty, money-draining monument to Charlie’s grandiose, self-inflated ego that stands just a bit too far from the city of Atlanta itself to attract business. The main lender, Plannersbanc, senses Charlie’s weakness. They try to humiliate and force Charlie to repay his loans by selling his luxury vehicles, his Gulfstream Five, and his plantation. Because selling these items would be affront to Charlie’s sense of success, he refuses to sell any of these items, and instead, he opts to cut jobs at Croker Global Foods.

The lay-offs, however, do not reverse Charlie’s business woes and he faces imminent financial ruin. Suffering from insomnia, he spends many sleepless nights worrying about losing his business and his life-long success. He feels alienated from his children and his second (and much younger) wife is of little comfort to him, who tends to patronize him. Moreover, Charlie experiences dread when his wife suggests sexual

⁶⁷ Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full* (New York: Dial Press, 2005), 60.

intimacy for fear for revealing that he is impotent. His physical decline hastens; a painful knee injury worsens rendering him nearly immobile and in need of surgery. Sinking into self-pity and depression, Charlie realizes that he is not the man he once was.

Although the novel begins with Charlie suffering humiliation, feeling old and spent, and with a painful arthritic knee, Charlie has an image of his ideal self as a man in full—a man capable of legendary or folk hero feats of strength and daring. Charlie frequently recalls an old folk song with which he identifies that, among its lyrics, says “Charlie Croker was a man in full. He had a back like a Jersey bull.”⁶⁸ Charlie says to himself “*I’ve got a back like a Jersey bull*” (italics in original).⁶⁹ Charlie cultivates this folk hero image. To an interviewer asking about his “exercise regimen,” Charlie responds that he does not have one, but that “when I need firewood, I start with a tree.”⁷⁰ Even Raymond Peepgass, the senior loan officer at Plannersbank, recognizes that Charlie had “*masculinity to burn*” (italics in original), though he resents Charlie and his “Southern Manhood stuff.”⁷¹ In another incident, with bare hands, Charlie seizes a rattlesnake behind the head knowing that it was “foolhardy,” but done for the sake of impressing those around him with his daring.⁷² He tries to reclaim his old feeling of fullness, or manly courage, but his attempts are reckless and prankish. His success with the rattlesnake makes him feel “almost whole again,” but this moment of wholeness is

⁶⁸ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 6.

⁶⁹ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 56.

⁷⁰ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 37.

⁷¹ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 32 and 36.

⁷² Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 79. In fact, Charlie claims that “there was no other choice but the foolhardiest possible way.”

short-lived.⁷³ When Plannersbanc seizes his Gulfstream-5 plane, Charlie drops a wrench in the engine to get back at them for humiliating him.

Charlie enjoys this image of himself, because it gives him an advantage in business so that he can muscle his way to success. In the business world, Raymond Peppgass observes that there are two kinds of men. There were those “passive males,” like himself, “who went into commercial banking,” and then there were “the Charlie Crokers of this world,” who made risky, bold business moves such as real estate development.⁷⁴ Raymond resents Charlie and his type, because they believed that if they ever got into a financial fix, they would rely on “their stronger wills, greater guile, and higher levels of testosterone” to compel the Raymond Peppgasses “to roll over their out-of-control loans, restructure them, refinance them, or otherwise push trouble off into an open-ended future.”⁷⁵ Charlie has great confidence in his mettle and strength and can ward off failure by pushing around individuals weaker than himself. The showdown between Charlie and Plannersbanc exemplifies the business world ethic, or the “Male Battle” in which the strongest wins and bends the weaker to his will.⁷⁶ That particular meeting goes terribly wrong for Charlie and more than ever Charlie feels that his end is near. Because the business world rewards risk takers and brute shows of domineering strength, Charlie’s physical decline seems to signal the end of his life’s work.

However, if we look closer into the cause of Charlie’s business troubles, we see that at root the cause is not his physical decline, but his fear of aging, mortality, and

⁷³ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 82.

⁷⁴ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 43.

⁷⁵ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 43.

⁷⁶ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 34.

losing what he considers his life's work. As he ages, Charlie finds it hard to live up to his image of himself and is unwilling to confront his mortality. His fear of showing weakness or his age leads him to petty and desperate measures to preserve his image of strength to himself and to others. As an example of petty image protecting, Charlie frequently claims that the rheumatism in his knee is an old football injury. He takes scrupulous care to let everyone—including the Piedmont Driving Club parking captain—know that his aching right knee is not due to age or arthritis, but an old football injury that “qualified it as an honorable wound of war.”⁷⁷ Charlie's divorce and remarriage underscore how far he goes to deceive himself. He divorces his first wife, Martha, in favor of Serena, a much younger woman. He rationalizes that he needed a younger wife “in order to maintain his vitality,” because he believed that his success as a businessman was tied to his sexual potency.⁷⁸ His remarriage backfires. Serena is not a comforting companion. Charlie does not feel comfortable sharing with her his business concerns and sometimes he misses how he could discuss his worries with Martha. Instead of revitalizing Charlie through sex, she serves as a nightly reminder of his age and impotence. Charlie avoids initiating sex with Serena, because he fears that he is impotent and “he didn't want to have to take the test and find out for sure.”⁷⁹ Charlie evades rather than confronts.

In fact, fear of losing his strength and vigor—all that he prized about himself—motivates Charlie to build Croker Concourse, the huge building too far outside the perimeter of Atlanta to be attractive for businesses. He believes that his business success

⁷⁷ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 344.

⁷⁸ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 210.

⁷⁹ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 210.

has been all his own and overlooks the ways in which his first wife, Martha, helped him. In his youth, Charlie relied much on Martha's social connections for advancement in his early career. Charlie believes he is a "self-made Cap'm Charlie," but we learn later from Martha the extent to which she helped him in business.⁸⁰ Martha recalls "her career as a business partner, co-developer, and indispensable counselor of the man now known as that rugged individualist Charlie Croker."⁸¹ Building Croker Concourse was the business decision that ruined him and one that he made independently of Martha. Charlie built Croker Concourse and named it after himself for the sake of impressing Serena, proving his vigor to himself, and being a lasting testimony to his success. He makes his boldest risk not from self-confidence, but to hide from himself and others his self-doubt.

As part of his folk hero image, Charlie prizes a painting of Jim Bowie depicted rising from his deathbed to fight at the Alamo. By juxtaposing a real hero with Charlie, Wolfe illustrates Charlie's failure to understand what courage is and what it is for. After the humiliating meeting with Plannersbanc, Charlie looks to the painting to inspire him with courage, but he feels only panic. It is to Charlie's credit that he admires the image of Bowie rising from a deathbed to defend the Alamo and that he longs to be courageous himself. Wolfe shows that Charlie wants the right things, but he does not know what courage is and he does not know what it is for. Charlie interprets the painting to mean "[n]ever say die, even when you're dying."⁸² But "never say die" does not inspire courage, but self-denial. Self-denial is a poor attempt to deal with fear of death by refusing to confront it and clinging to life. Courage is "the virtue concerned with

⁸⁰ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 37.

⁸¹ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 203.

⁸² Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 57.

controlling fear,” and, as Harvey C. Mansfield explains, “[m]anly men rise above their fear, but in doing so they carry their fear with them, though it is under control.”⁸³

Controlling one’s fear is achieved not by denying or evading death, but by choosing the manner in which one meets it. Bowie knew that he could not avoid his death. He could die in bed or he could die defending the Alamo. Bowie rose from his deathbed, because he *chose* to die for the sake of defending the Alamo against aggressors and not for the sake of futilely hoping to prolong his life.

Charlie, however, is too attached to his business, views it as an extension of himself, to let go of it. His business success is a sign of his physical strength and virility, and it is these personal qualities that fade with age that Charlie is most unwilling to be deprived of. He treasures his physical virtues over his internal virtues. Consequently, for Charlie, the things he believes are necessary for his happiness are entirely external to himself. Instead of bringing him happiness or comfort, he frets and loses sleep over how to hold on to his possessions, but most of all, he fears the decline of his body. He does not yet know to treasure strength of soul, which cannot be taken away, over bodily strength that fades with age. Charlie must learn this lesson, but the much admired painting cannot teach it to him.

Charlie faces a dilemma when fate presents him with the chance to be freed of his debts and save his business, but only at the expense of betraying a friend and his own integrity. Fareek Fanon, a black Georgia Tech football star has been accused in public (not legally) of raping the white daughter of an established white Atlanta businessman. It is feared that if the political situation is not diffused, racial tensions could result in a riot. As a former Georgia Tech football star and as part of the white establishment,

⁸³ Harvey C. Mansfield, *Manliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 18.

Charlie is an ideal individual to help diffuse the situation. Through the mayor's representative, Charlie is offered a deal that if he will speak in public in favor of Fanon, Plannersbank will be pressured into releasing him of his debts. On the other hand, the businessman is a friend of Charlie's to whom he has given his word to support. Charlie is not inclined to betray his friend. Moreover, the public statement defending Fanon would compromise himself since he does not like Fanon personally and is unsure if the rape happened. Stuck with this irresolvable dilemma, Charlie opts for knee surgery to delay making a decision.

While Charlie recovers from his knee surgery, Conrad, who was one of Charlie's laid off employees, helps Charlie with his physical therapy and to regain control of his knee. More importantly, Conrad helps Charlie spiritually to recover himself by introducing him to stoicism. Through Conrad's help, Charlie learns the courage to carve a third course in which he is freed not from financial and social ruin but rather from the fear of such ruin. Conrad Hensley is the messenger of stoicism. A dose of stoicism is just what Charlie needs to learn freedom from things that can be taken away. Stoicism, as Mansfield observes, is "the philosophy of inner freedom, of manly confidence learned by living as if you were a prisoner and had to depend for your happiness on nothing external to yourself."⁸⁴ Through Conrad, Charlie learns care of the soul, which is more lasting and permanent than his goods and body. However, as will be discussed below, Wolfe shows that classic stoicism is too self-sufficient. Charlie's introduction to stoic inner freedom and contentment is only part of his recovery. The other part, as I shall argue, is that by showing Conrad assist Charlie not only in his physical recovery but also

⁸⁴ Mansfield, 199.

his moral recovery, Wolfe illustrates how Conrad's friendship teaches Charlie the courage that he could not learn from observing the painting of Jim Bowie.

Before Conrad meets Charlie, he has himself undergone a painful moral and spiritual development that culminates in his turn to stoicism. Although raised by hippies who ridiculed bourgeois life, Conrad Hensley longs for a typical middle-class life in which orderly living, honesty, and honorable labor are respected. Never knowing or experiencing the habits of middle class life, Conrad learns about it from a course at Mount Diablo Community College. To Conrad the bourgeois life, which includes "order, moral rectitude, courtesy, cooperation, education, financial success, comfort, respectability, pride in one's offspring, and, above all, domestic tranquility," sounds like an ideal life.⁸⁵ But the path to middle-class life does not prove easy. Conrad chooses to marry his pregnant girlfriend, and despite demonstrating academic promise, he foregoes applying at Berkeley so as to work full-time and provide for his family. He works at Croker Global Foods in the ugly, Oakland side of the San Francisco Bay Area. Conrad works in what the employees called the "Suicidal Freezer Unit," whose name indicates the harsh, back-breaking, labor-intensive conditions to which they are subject in the freezer warehouse. He saves diligently from his meager earnings for a condo—the purchase of which represents his attainment of the middle class life and a better life. Through Conrad, Wolfe shows that middle class life is honorable and that it is not easy, but requires much dedication, self-restraint, and sacrifice. Nor is bourgeois life devoid of opportunities for virtuous action: he risks himself to save the life of a co-worker. Unlike Charlie, Conrad is admirable, steadfast, and courageous.

⁸⁵ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 157.

Conrad suffers a series of near-spirit crushing misfortunes and injustices that culminate in his arrest and imprisonment. Conrad loses his job when Charlie decides to cut jobs at Croker Global Foods. Conrad tries to gain a job typing, but his hands have become so muscular from moving frozen foods in the warehouse that his fingers are too large to type. Then, in an attempt to prevent his car from being destroyed in a towing yard, Conrad appears to be threatening the proprietor and a police officer arrests him for assault. He could have pled guilty to the assault charge and accepted probation. But, instead, he believes that he “wasn’t guilty of anything” and is sent to jail.⁸⁶ When his wife, Jill, reproaches him for refusing the plea bargain and losing everything, Conrad disagrees and tells her that he “kept something...I kept my honor, and I didn’t bargain away my soul.”⁸⁷ Jill does not understand how his soul is worth losing his freedom, his family, their savings, and his dream of middle class life. Conrad does not understand very well either, but he knows that he is innocent and “refused to compromise with a lie.”⁸⁸

By accident while he is in prison, Conrad receives a book of Epictetus’s writings. Epictetus helps Conrad deepen his understanding and teaches him how to articulate his belief that he had a soul that is worth preserving, that should not be compromised, and that his soul constitutes the most real quality about him. Epictetus attracts Conrad, because Epictetus supposes that “life is hard, brutal, punishing, narrow, and confining, a deadly business, and that fairness and unfairness are beside the point.”⁸⁹ Epictetus

⁸⁶ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 324.

⁸⁷ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 325.

⁸⁸ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 325.

⁸⁹ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 381.

teaches the opposite from everything that Conrad learned about philosophy at school. In school, he was taught that people are free and their “main problem was to choose from among life’s infinite possibilities.”⁹⁰ Conrad’s experience more closely resembles Epictetus’s account of human life. Wolfe makes a jab at liberalism’s incomplete understanding of human beings. Human beings are not the autonomous individuals liberalism supposes. Any account of happiness that focuses on being comfortable and securing external goods fails to account for the only part of oneself over which one has control, which is the soul.

With Epictetus as his guide, Conrad finds a new kind of freedom. Within the narrow confines of life, living well means that “you will do your part, and I mine.”⁹¹ Doing one’s part means acting nobly as a child of Zeus in whose soul resides one’s only true possession--“spark of his divine fire” that gives one the ability to reason and to will what is good and avoid what is bad.⁹² Conrad learns that one should not worry about things that do not depend on one will such as possessions, reputation, and imprisonment, nor try to escape misfortune, because, as a carrier of the spark of the divine, one has “endowments and resources...to bring [oneself] honor through what befalls.”⁹³ Conrad experiences intellectual delight and sympathy reading Epictetus's dialogues, and in so doing, becomes a 20th century student of Epictetus.

However, Conrad soon discovers the limits of stoicism. The Santa Rita prison contains its own unique social structure comprised of several racially based prison gangs.

⁹⁰ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 381.

⁹¹ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 380.

⁹² Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 411.

⁹³ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 411.

The feared Rotto, the leader of the white prison gang, the Nordic Bund, stays in power through intimidation, violence, and raping new, white inmates (called “new fish”) who do not belong to any gang and so are defenseless.⁹⁴ Shortly after Conrad arrives, another new white inmate arrives who is known only as Pocahontas. He is a young, thin, skinny, effeminate man with a Mohawk haircut and many empty earring piercings. Conrad feels sorry for him, but does nothing to bond with the young man for fear of attracting Rotto’s attention and aligning himself with someone so vulnerable and Rotto’s next target.⁹⁵

Conrad wonders what “his duty toward this sad, strange, friendless soul” is and considers Epictetus’s counsel to his students to leave the unfortunate to their misfortune and not to make excuses for those with “degenerate spirits.”⁹⁶ Stoicism is severe and austere. It advises against coming to the aid of one suffering misfortune, because what happens to other people is beyond our power and our responsibility. Epictetus advises his students that “if a man is unfortunate, remember that his misfortune is his own fault; for Zeus created all men for happiness and peace of mind.”⁹⁷ Interceding on behalf of another means one believes that someone else’s well-being affects oneself, which stoicism denies. External suffering and misfortune cannot really agitate the happiness of a true stoic. The stoic knows that his happiness is entirely dependent on his internal resources, and he can remain happy regardless of what accidents of fortune may befall him.

Stoicism lacks a duty to others, a principle of charity, or a reason why one might sacrifice one’s comfort and well-being for another. At first, Conrad considers Epictetus

⁹⁴ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 319.

⁹⁵ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 378.

⁹⁶ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 412 and 413.

⁹⁷ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 412.

to be “hard-hearted,” but reflects how the young man cultivated an attention grabbing appearance with his piercings, hairstyle, and shaved eyebrows and so had brought on much of his misfortune. As Conrad watches Pocahontas who is isolated, shunned, helpless and waiting for Rotto to take advantage of him, he begins to doubt whether he interpreted Epictetus correctly or whether he was interpreting him as severe so as to avoid his duty. In the mist of Conrad’s hermeneutical doubt, Rotto and his followers take the young man into the shower to abuse and rape him. When the young man emerges and collapses, Conrad ignores Epictetus’s teaching and rushes to the young man’s side and calls for the guards to get medical assistance. By coming to the young man’s aid, Conrad marks himself for Rotto and the Nordic Bund’s revenge. Conrad decides that it is wrong to look away “when a brute decides to have his way with the hide of another human being.”⁹⁸ He regrets that he had failed to reach out to the young man before he had been raped. Conrad finds the courage to confront and fight Rotto. Providentially, Conrad’s muscular hands crush Rotto’s wrist, and he wins the match.

By a lucky earthquake, Conrad escapes from prison, hides in Atlanta, and meets Charlie Croker. Conrad becomes a “messenger” of stoicism to Charlie—although a messenger of a distinctively friendlier stoicism.⁹⁹ As noted above, Charlie is faced with a dilemma to either speak publicly on behalf of Fareek Fanan and be freed of his debts or lose everything. He asks Conrad for advice. Conrad tells Charlie a story about Florus, a Roman historian, that Epictetus tells to instruct his student on what to do when confronted the choice between degrading oneself or suffering punishment or death. Nero

⁹⁸ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 420.

⁹⁹ When Conrad is in prison, he thinks of Epictetus as “Zeus’ messenger” (409). After the earthquake occasions his escape from prison, Conrad, interpreting the earthquake providentially, believes that he is now a “messenger” of Zeus (594).

summoned Florus to act out plays for his amusement or to suffer death. Florus asks his friend, Agrippinus, a stoic philosopher, what he ought to do and Agrippinus advises that he perform in Nero's play. When Florus asks if Agrippinus planned to act in the play, Agrippinus says that he will not. Florus further inquires why he should perform in the plays but not him. Agrippinus says, "[b]ecause you have *considered* it" (italics in the original).¹⁰⁰ By this point in the story, we know that Charlie has considered publicly supporting Fanon.¹⁰¹ Classic stoic advice would be to counsel Charlie to go ahead and publicly side with Fanon. Such a course would be true to his albeit weaker self. But Conrad does not give him this advice. Instead, Conrad and Charlie talk honestly with each and come up with a plan for Charlie to do neither option, but to use the public forum to tell the audience about stoicism.¹⁰² Though Charlie's public talk about stoicism does not succeed in convincing anyone, he "felt like a man free of all encumbrances. He felt whole again."¹⁰³

After their initial confidential talk, Conrad tells Charlie that after Agrippinus refused to perform in Nero's play, his property is confiscated and he is exiled—he does not receive death—and he and a friend leave for Acicia. Wolfe presents the epilogue as a conversation between Roger White, the lawyer who presented Charlie with the option of publicly defending Fanon, and White's friend, the mayor of Atlanta, Wes Jordan.

¹⁰⁰ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 379.

¹⁰¹ See Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 532-33.

¹⁰² Uncharacteristically, Wolfe does not present the readers with the conversation itself, but reports only that "[t]hey started talking, both of them, and they held nothing back, nothing at all" until very late in the evening (660).

¹⁰³ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 671.

They laugh and find Charlie and Conrad amusingly “*weird*” (italics in original).¹⁰⁴

Charlie leaves his corporation and becomes a Zeus evangelist in southern Alabama and the Florida panhandle. His message is so successful that he will host a show called *The Stoic’s Hour* that will be nationally syndicated by Fox Broadcasting. Conrad turns himself in to custody. During his trial, when the judge asks him if he has anything to say, Conrad tells him that it is for the judge to do his task and for him to do his task and that he is “tranquil” regardless of what happens to him because he is a spark of Zeus.¹⁰⁵ Impressed, the judge decides to treat him leniently and gives him probation. In some ways, Charlie and Conrad are like Agrippinus and his friend who are exiled from Rome. They have lost their property, their former friends, and their social respectability. And like Agrippinus and his friend who leave their city in exile, Charlie and Conrad leave Atlanta.

But the comparison should not be pushed too far. Human life is not constrained as metaphysically and politically as stoicism assumes. The difference between Charlie and Conrad and Agrippinus highlights how they come to much better fates than Agrippinus. Charlie and Conrad do not live under Nero or any other tyranny. Conrad receives a light punishment from a judge impressed by his self-possessed demeanor. The state does not take away Charlie’s property and status, but he chooses to walk away from his possessions and respectability. Moreover, Charlie and Conrad are free to seek the company of other people to whom they can tell about being a spark of the divine. Atlanta is only a small part of the United States, and they are free to form a new social group of Zeus followers as an alternative to mainstream society. Epictetus’s severe,

¹⁰⁴ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 681.

¹⁰⁵ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 681.

uncompromising outlook of human life in which life is brutal and unfair initially attracted Conrad, because he believed it was truer to his experience than the philosophy of autonomy he learned about in school. However, Conrad's decision to aid Rotto's victim and then fight Rotto is a turning point in which he realizes that life is neither as constrained as Epictetus teaches nor as autonomous as liberalism teaches.

Despite Epictetus's advice, Conrad decides to risk his own well-being for the sake of the well-being of another. In this way, Wolfe amends stoicism to be more other-regarding. How does Conrad reason to a duty to help others? Both Peter Augustine Lawler and P. J. O'Rourke argue that, in some manner, Wolfe introduces Christian concepts to stoicism. Lawler maintains that Conrad's first act as a stoic is "an awfully Christian one" and claims that Conrad's stoicism incorporates "Christian elements."¹⁰⁶ According to Lawler, stoicism "unrealistically exaggerates individual self-sufficiency" to the point that self-sufficiency and self-reliance on one's internal freedom for happiness deprives the individual of the "social context" in which courage "must operate to be genuinely fulfilling."¹⁰⁷ P. J. O'Rourke argues that the "first thing that Conrad Hensley does, after deciding he's a stoic, is violate the tenets of stoicism with an act of Christian charity."¹⁰⁸ O'Rourke argues that Wolfe introduces Christian charity through Epictetus who functions as a Christ stand-in. O'Rourke explains that Epictetus was an optimal choice because unlike stoicism's pre-Christian founder Zeno or the Emperor and also Christian-persecutor Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus was a stoic who lived contemporaneously with Christians and, like Christ, suffered torture and imprisonment.

¹⁰⁶ Lawler, "Real Men," 82.

¹⁰⁷ Lawler, "Real Men," 82.

¹⁰⁸ O'Rourke, "God and Man in Full," 74.

Yet, both of these arguments go further than Wolfe's text to acknowledge Christianity's influence on Charlie and Conrad's stoicism. Lawler rightly argues that stoicism goes too far to make happiness utterly self-sufficient. Wolfe certainly points to this shortcoming of stoicism and shows that individual happiness depends on our relationships with others, but it is not clear that Wolfe understands his modification of stoicism to be an inclusion of Christian concepts, though Wolfe does acknowledge a debt to Christian evangelical methods. Christian grass roots evangelicalism and big tent revivalism serve as models for Charlie and Conrad's success at popularizing stoicism in the southeast. With the prospect of *The Stoic's Hour* being nationally broadcast, Charlie is poised to become a televangelist for stoicism. Wolfe admires Christian evangelicals, not for their beliefs but for their proud counter-culturalism. O'Rourke's evidence that he claims shows that Epictetus is a Christ stand-in is unconvincing. Epictetus's history as a slave and victim of torture certainly make him a more sympathetic character to Conrad than Zeno or Marcus Aurelius. But the fact that Epictetus was a contemporary of early Christians more clearly contrasts his theoretical distinction from any Christian concepts of charity. Moreover, when Conrad stands up to Rotto, he understands his actions to be in line with stoicism not in violation. Secondly, when Conrad tells his landlords in Atlanta about stoicism, he maintains a distinction between stoicism and Christianity. Conrad tells them that stoicism is "pre-Christian" and that "[t]he Stoics influenced the early Christians."¹⁰⁹

In contrast to Lawler and O'Rourke, I maintain that Wolfe amends stoicism to complement liberal principles. Class stoicism's self-reliant happiness is more suited to the living conditions under a Roman tyranny than in the United States. Wolfe adjusts

¹⁰⁹ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 584.

stoicism to be more other-regarding, or more, properly speaking, political. Courageous action is needed against arbitrary and abusive power. After witnessing Rotto's brutality to the young man, Conrad realizes that "when a brute decides to have his way with the hide of another human being" it is wrong not to intercede, because one does not want to risk one's own contentment. Conrad resolves the tension between Epictetus's apparent hard-heartedness to the suffering of others and his inclination to assist Rotto's victim by privileging the stoic teaching that he is a spark of Zeus over avoiding the misfortunes of others. In the prison, Rotto and his gang rule through fear of severe physical violence and the vulnerable are socially ostracized and left isolated and friendless. Consequently, they are even more open to the Nordic Bund's aggressions and torments. Assisting Rotto's victim makes Conrad Rotto's next target and as Conrad waits for Rotto and his gang to approach him, he observes that every other prisoner looks away from him, just as they and he had looked the other way when Rotto and his gang raped the young man. Now that he too is marked for Rotto's violence, Conrad realizes that by failing to help the young man, he had been a slave to fear of bodily harm. But as a spark of the divine, his body, Conrad concludes, is unimportant. The real, or the "living part of him was his soul, and his soul was nothing other than the spark of Zeus."¹¹⁰ Conrad realizes that the violation of spark of the divine in one person exposes in principle every individual to the danger of becoming a plaything of brutes. Everyone has a spark of the divine—even those who bring much of their misfortune upon themselves—that warrants protection against the abuses of the strong and powerful.

¹¹⁰ Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 421.

Conrad learns to help others, but he longs to share stoicism with another.¹¹¹

Meeting Charlie presents Conrad with the opportunity to teach someone else about Epictetus. When Conrad meets Charlie, he sees how affected Charlie is by his physical decline and believes that Epictetus's teachings concerning the irrelevance of the body could help Charlie. Conrad tells Charlie that he wished there was "somebody around today, somebody you could go to, the way students went to Epictetus."¹¹² Conrad looks for someone with whom he can really share stoicism. Indeed, Conrad longs to be like the students in Epictetus's dialogues and be able to converse with someone else about the truth of human life. As Conrad tells Charlie about stoicism, Charlie finds it appealing and he shares with Conrad his troubles. Together, they decide that Charlie will use his public appearance to tell everyone about stoicism. Conrad honors Epictetus better by following his example of sharing his philosophy and having friends than if he refused to intervene in the lives of others. In this way, Wolfe suggests that even stoicism does not truly teach rigorous self-sufficient happiness, but that individual happiness includes sharing and exchanging one's ideas and beliefs with others.

Sherman and Charlie are similar protagonists; they are ruined while they conform to mainstream society, but learn to search for status and happiness outside of mainstream society. As we see in the epilogues, mainstream society—and even, no doubt, we readers—considers Sherman, Charlie, and Conrad's actions incomprehensible and

¹¹¹ Conrad failed to befriend the vulnerable young man in the prison, but afterward, Conrad starts helping others. When the earthquake strikes the Santa Rita prison, Conrad helps his cellmate, Five-O, out of the rubble. But by helping to pull Five-O out, Conrad risks his own chance at gaining his freedom and being crushed with Five-O in the crumbling structure. Then, in Atlanta at his first job as a nurse's helper for Carter Home Care, Conrad is assigned to help the Gardners. The Gardners are an old Southern couple with limited mobility and nearly impoverished who are weekly extorted for cash by a con artist. Conrad intimidates the con artist and ensures that he will not approach the Gardners again. Five-O and the Gardners are vulnerable, weak individuals that, Conrad believes, need protection.

¹¹² Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 619.

wacky, but we also see that they are *happier*. Wolfe must shock our sensibilities so that we see how political liberty serves the pursuit of happiness. Whenever one social group bears heavily on ourselves, we are politically free to leave and need only the courage to do so. Americans do not lack political liberty. From *The Bonfire of the Vanities* to *A Man in Full*, Wolfe shows that the United States lacks the proper support for the development of courage. It should not come as a surprise that in *I Am Charlotte Simmons* Wolfe turns to America's great universities and finds that these establishments dedicated to liberal education do not prepare students to live as free men and women. Unlike Sherman and Charlie, Charlotte does not find the courage to stand against Dupont's corrupt student life and instead seeks status within its rules.

I Am Charlotte Simmons

The Bonfire of the Vanities and *A Man in Full* follow the fates of society's insiders. In contrast, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* traces the development of Charlotte Simmons, a social outsider who faces tremendous social pressure to fit into a corrupt society, but fails to find the courage to stand up for herself. Although she says "I Am Charlotte Simmons" to remind herself of her uniqueness, Charlotte lacks any independent self-understanding removed from the opinion of others. And despite frequently being reminded to stand above the crowd, her education does not prepare her to understand herself as a free being capable of making moral decisions apart from her peers. The proud claim "I Am Charlotte Simmons" proves to be hollow self-assertion. Anemic and with little remembrance of its original purpose, liberal education weakly defends itself against anti-liberal ideas that undermine belief in individual moral freedom. *I Am Charlotte Simmons* reminds its readers that the original purpose of liberal education was

to prepare individuals to live as free moral agents—a task, Wolfe reminds us, Americans still need to perform today for the sake of pursuing happiness.

I Am Charlotte Simmons was less of a critical success than Wolfe's first two novels. Commentators agree that Wolfe unflatteringly depicts students preoccupied with casual sex, excessive drinking, and vulgar speech, but they sharply disagree on whether college life merits negative portrayal. Friendly reviewers generally praise the novel for its frank exposure of the corruption and immorality now commonplace at American universities.¹¹³ Likening the novel to a cautionary tale, Mary Ann Glendon believes that the novel depicts "a parent's worst nightmare" and shows a young, intelligent, innocent girl succumb to the pressures of college life "where young people are left almost completely free to act on their most primitive impulses."¹¹⁴ On the other hand, negative commentators argue that Wolfe prudishly depicts behavior that should not be surprising and no cause for alarm.¹¹⁵ *New York Times* reviewer, Michiko Kakutani called the book "flat-footed" for failing to capture the latest zeitgeist and sarcastically summed up the lesson of *I Am Charlotte Simmons*: "yikes—that students crave sex and beer, love to party, wear casual clothes, and use four-letter words."¹¹⁶ In response, Barbara Scrupski

¹¹³ Peter Berkowitz, "He is Charlotte Simmons," *Policy Review* (February & March 2005): 78-86; Mark Bowden, "Cry Wolfe," *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 2006): 109-114; Mary Ann Glendon, "Off at College," *First Things* 150 (February 2005): 41-44; Jane M. Orient, "Review of *I Am Charlotte Simmons*," *Journal of American Physicians and Surgeons* 10 (2005): 126-127.

¹¹⁴ Mary Ann Glendon, "Off at College," *First Things* 150 (February 2005): 41.

¹¹⁵ See Michael Dirda, "A Coed in Full," (November 7, 2004): BW15; David Kipen, "A College Novel that Reads Like Homework," *San Francisco Chronicle* (November 4, 2004): E-1; Blake Morrison, "Ohmygod it's a Caricature: Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* Shows Detailed Research but Blake Morrison Wants More Artistry," *The Guardian* (November 6, 2004) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/nov/06/fiction.tomwolfe>. For an analysis of attempting to answer why reviewers disliked *I Am Charlotte Simmons* see Barbara Scrupski, "Why the Critics Hate Charlotte Simmons," *Academic Questions* 18 (Winter 2004/2005): 87.

¹¹⁶ Michiko Kakutani, "So Where's the Zeitgeist? It Looks Just Like College," *The New York Times*, October 29, 2004, E42.

argues that negative reviewers, or liberal reviewers as she identifies them, have a deeper quarrel with Wolfe's latest novel. As Scrupki notes, in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and *A Man in Full*, Wolfe "satirized the sorts of people liberals love to hate (Wall Street big shots, rich businessmen)."¹¹⁷ However, in *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Wolfe depicts "the very avatars of the liberal ethos, the practitioners of liberation—college students at an elite university."¹¹⁸ Liberal reviewers, Scrupki concludes, ridicule *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, because they correctly recognize that Wolfe faults their liberal ethos for failing to guide students on how to live well.

Scrupki's interpretation complements Wolfe's description of his portrayal of how universities morally educate young adults. In an interview, Wolfe claims that universities have displaced churches as the primary suppliers of guidance and morals on how to live in the United States today. For the most part, students learn various "isms" that are "subsets of the overarching theme of political correctness, which is tolerance."¹¹⁹ Wolfe makes it clear that he is not against political correctness and tolerance. Indeed, he believes that political correctness has fostered respect for minorities and has accorded status to socially disadvantaged individuals who would otherwise lack status (such as AIDS patients). Nevertheless, Wolfe finds it *limited* in perspective and application. Political correctness, or rather, liberalism is limited because its primary virtue, tolerance, is passive. In contrast, Wolfe says that "Aristotelian justice could be severe as well as fair" and it "includes the courage to take up arms to fight in battle to defend your

¹¹⁷ Barbara Scrupki, "Why the Critics Hate Charlotte Simmons," *Academic Questions* (Winter 2004-05): 89.

¹¹⁸ Scrupki, 89.

¹¹⁹ Carol Innone, "A Critic in Full: A Conversation with Tom Wolfe," *Academic Questions* (2008): 141.

people.”¹²⁰ Wolfe pointedly adds that when professors talk about courage and justice, they usually mean that students ought to stage a protest and carry placards. Yet, the deeper problem is that liberalism’s virtue, tolerance, and its goal, social justice, are secularized Christian teachings (minus the cardinal virtues).¹²¹ Social justice shies away from making distinctions among individuals so as to achieve maximum inclusion. But despite usefully making it possible for otherwise marginalized groups to be accorded respect, liberalism and political correctness overextends itself to all ideas and areas of life, exerts incredible social pressure on the individual to follow its lead, and makes the individual more dependent on the crowd for his ideas and modes of behavior. The upshot is that liberalism undermines the individual’s confidence in himself and denies his particular importance. If Wolfe presents any hope in this novel, it appears to reside in liberal education in the classical sense, as articulated by Charlotte who, as we shall see, recalls that learning to live as a free person is the purpose of a liberal education. Even if Charlotte lacks understanding and mouths what to her are meaningless phrases, the promise of a liberal education is meaningful to her boyfriend, Jojo. Jojo learns to resist his “jock” image and demands more from his college education.

Born in Sparta, North Carolina, a conservative, small, poor, uneducated area, Charlotte Simmons stands out as a remarkably intelligent young woman. She graduates from high school as the valedictorian, earns the tops honors in nearly every field, receives a perfect score on her SAT, and is awarded a prestigious scholarship. Miss Pennington, her most trusted teacher and mentor, advises Charlotte to apply to the best American

¹²⁰ Innone, 141.

¹²¹ Wolfe tells Innone that “‘Social justice’ is nothing more than a secular rephrasing of Biblical teaching that ‘the last come first and the meek shall inherit the earth’” (141).

schools, and tells her “*you are destined to do great things*” (italics in original).¹²² After being accepted to all, Charlotte accepts a full scholarship to Dupont University, a preeminent university on par with America’s best Ivy League schools.

At first, Charlotte appears to be independent and able to withstand Dupont’s easy and luxurious morality that differs greatly from Sparta’s moral austerity and proud provincialism. But as I shall argue below, even before entering Dupont, Charlotte’s earliest teachers, Mrs. Simmons and Miss Pennington, do not prepare her to look inward and find the fortitude to resist public opinion. She relies on the opinion of others for her self-understanding and so believes that she is the brilliant, exceptional, and independent person they think she is. Wolfe does not, therefore, present Charlotte simply as an innocent young woman corrupted by university life, although Dupont fails to educate her about herself.

Believing herself free from self-illusions, Charlotte tries to demonstrate her freedom by controlling Hoyt Thorpe, the most popular young man at Dupont, who is attracted to her. Charlotte encourages Hoyt’s sexual desire for her with the aim of withholding sex from him to demonstrate both his subjection to her and her superior self-control. But Charlotte cannot manage her erotic longings, and Hoyt and she have sex. Afterward, Hoyt disassociates himself from her and publicly humiliates her by crudely describing her first sexual experience. Charlotte realizes that Hoyt had never been under her control and that she was the one seduced and lacking in self-restraint. Charlotte falls into depression, but Adam Gellin, a geeky, intellectual young man attracted to her, helps her through it. After she recovers, Charlotte disassociates herself from Adam, because his friendship does not raise her status. Instead, Charlotte becomes the girlfriend of Jojo,

¹²² Tom Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (New York: Picador, 2005), 15.

a basketball star, and ostensibly achieves the status she desires. Despite achieving her fondest wish, the novel's final scene reveals that Charlotte is internally troubled, conflicted, and unhappy.

From her childhood, Charlotte's outstanding intelligence sets her apart from her peers. Her mother, her teachers, and Sparta as a community consider Charlotte so exceptional that they treat and educate her as if she were a superior individual. Mrs. Simmons neglects to teach her daughter basic skills, even those practiced by herself such as sewing, that she thinks are unworthy of her daughter's superior intelligence.¹²³ Miss Pennington helps Charlotte advance in her academic studies and encourages her to think about her future and apply to America's best universities. Miss Pennington's care for Charlotte is in stark contrast to how she views most of her students: "they're not even worth the trouble it takes to ignore them."¹²⁴ At Charlotte's graduation, "[The adults at graduation ceremony] saw her as a wonder child, a prodigy miraculously arisen from the rocky soil of Sparta."¹²⁵ Awed before Charlotte, the community marvels to account for Charlotte's remarkable intelligence given the ordinary material from which she sprung and consider her like a demi-god born without human parentage. Nevertheless, both Mrs. Simmons and Miss Pennington believe they can explain who Charlotte is and vie with each other to influence her. As her mother, Mrs. Simmons believes Charlotte owes who she is to God and her Spartan community.¹²⁶ As her closest teacher, Miss Pennington

¹²³ When Charlotte decides to reveal more of her legs, she haphazardly hems her skirt, because Mrs. Simmons "had never insisted that her precocious little genius reduce herself to such Alleghany Country housewifely toil" (420).

¹²⁴ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 29.

¹²⁵ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 16.

¹²⁶ In contrast to Mrs. Simmons, Mr. Simmons finds it hard to show love towards Charlotte, because he has a hard time recognizing her as his own. Charlotte feels alienated from her rustic and

believes she delivered (metaphorically) Charlotte's intellectual genius. Yet both Mrs. Simmons and Miss Pennington fail to teach Charlotte about herself. Both Mrs. Simmons and Miss Pennington believe Charlotte is a superior order individual and, consequently, neither teaches Charlotte to recognize her limits and faults. While both Mrs. Simmons and Miss Pennington believe they help Charlotte to stay independent and unique, they fail to recognize that being a single outsider leaves Charlotte vulnerable to peer pressure.

Though Mrs. Simmons is sufficiently "intelligent and shrewd" to realize that her own life had been limited, she takes comfort in her religion and her daughter's "phenomenal intelligence she had recognized by the time Charlotte was two."¹²⁷ As a creature of God, Mrs. Simmons believes her daughter's duty lies in moral rectitude. However, when Mrs. Simmons advises her daughter to resist peer pressure, she does not turn to Christian resources, but to her Spartan and mountain roots. Mrs. Simmons tells Charlotte that when facing peer pressure to do things she "don't hold with" at Dupont, she must remember that "mountain folks got their faults, but letting theirselves git pushed into doing thangs iddn' one uv'm. We know how to be real stubborn. Can't nobody make us do a thang once we git hard set against it" (italics in original).¹²⁸ Mrs. Simmons provides Charlotte with her mantra "I am Charlotte Simmons" and tells her that all she has to say is "'I'm Charlotte Simmons, and I don't hold with thangs like 'at.' And they'll respect you for that."¹²⁹ Mrs. Simmons is more Spartan than Christian in the respect that she appeals to her daughter's pride as a Spartan rather than her humility. Consequently,

taciturn father—she could not tell whether he regarded her with "love or wonder at what an inexplicable prodigy his daughter had become" (21).

¹²⁷ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 23.

¹²⁸ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 81.

¹²⁹ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 81.

for Mrs. Simmons, there is no question of who her daughter is and that she owes God her chastity and Sparta her allegiance. Duty is accepted without argument and challenges to duty are rejected without argument, but with proud self-assertion. However, for Charlotte, Mrs. Simmons's concept of identity is too narrow. Sparta does not encompass all of who Charlotte is. Charlotte shares neither her mother's unwavering faith nor her identity as mountain folk and prefers Miss Pennington's teachings.

As Charlotte's teacher, Miss Pennington sees how she has been responsible for Charlotte's brilliance, but also sees how Charlotte has the potential to determine who she is. Miss Pennington confides to Charlotte that:

[w]hen you're a teacher and you see a child achieve something, when you see a child reach a new level of understanding...a level that child would have never reached without you, there's a satisfaction...In some way, no matter how small, you've helped create a new person.¹³⁰

Although Miss Pennington believes that her influence upon Charlotte is akin to creating a "new person," she believes that Charlotte will through acts of self-creation accomplish great things on her own. In contrast to Mrs. Simmons, Miss Pennington teaches Charlotte that she has no identity and no content other than what she constructs herself. Two commentators on the novel, Mickey Craig and Jon Fennell, observe that Miss Pennington teaches Charlotte that she is "the higher (wo)man who will overcome the petty drudgery and do great things."¹³¹ By introducing Charlotte to the idea of self-creation and absence of fixed human nature, Miss Pennington prepares Charlotte for Dupont's post-modern world-view in which the self, the soul, and free will are illusions to be overcome. To comfort and harden Charlotte in the face of her peers' scorn for her,

¹³⁰ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 30.

¹³¹ Mickey Craig and Jon Fennell, "Wolfe Howling, or the Metamorphosis of Charlotte Simmons," *Perspectives on Political Science* 36 (2007): 105.

Miss Pennington reminds Charlotte that Nietzsche called the people who resent great individuals, like Charlotte, “tarantulas” and that “[t]heir sole satisfaction is bringing down people above them, seeing the mighty fall.”¹³²

At Dupont, Charlotte’s neuroscience professor, Mr. Starling, captures her interest. Charlotte believes that Mr. Starling’s teachings are exactly what Miss Pennington had promised she would discover beyond Sparta.¹³³ This was the moment Charlotte had been expecting at Dupont—the moment in which she found a teacher who “would lead her to the innermost secrets of life.”¹³⁴ Mr. Starling explains that his teachings are the real logical conclusion of philosophic materialism—“the Marxist notion of materialism is sheer whimsy compared to that of neuroscience.”¹³⁵ As the better materialist, Mr. Starling argues that the brain constructs the illusion of the self, the soul, and free will. The “self” is not a “command center” but is like a “village marketplace,” where ideas come to the individual and reside in the mind.¹³⁶ From these ideas, the mind constructs the idea of a “self.” The mind goes on to construct the idea of free will. As an illustration, Starling compares humans to rocks that have been thrown into the air and then mid-way given self-consciousness. Discovering itself in motion, the thrown conscious rock ‘will think it

¹³² Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 29.

¹³³ By Sparta, Miss Pennington surely meant both Sparta geographically and also Mrs. Simmons’s Christian morality. As a good Nietzschean, Miss Pennington believed that Charlotte would transcend Sparta and its “values” and create new horizons for herself. Charlotte’s identity has no content (she owes nothing to Sparta), but she is free to will and to create an identity for herself. Charlotte does not realize how deeply in conflict Miss Pennington’s Nietzschean teachings and Mr. Starling’s account are. Mr. Starling’s teaching is contrary to Nietzsche’s understanding that human beings are free and have no nature.

¹³⁴The full quote is “[Mr. Starling] who would lead her to the innermost secrets of life—and to the utmost brilliance of the glow on the other side of the mountains Miss Pennington had called her attention to four years ago” (426).

¹³⁵ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 426.

¹³⁶ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 425.

has free will and will give you a highly rational account of why it has decided to take the route its taking.’¹³⁷

Moreover, external forces alone can alter the thrown conscious rock’s course, and Mr. Starling gives his class examples of scientists manipulating the brain. Mr. Starling tells his class about José Delgado’s experiment that reinvigorated study of the brain, which had been considered a dead end since Freudian psychology dominated during the 1930s. Delgado halted a charging bull by manipulating rods connected to the bull’s brain and switched off its rage. The lesson, Mr. Starling concludes, is that “not only emotions but also *purposes* and *intentions* are physical matters” (italics in original).¹³⁸ All that individuals think, feel and intend are products of the physical workings of the brain over which the individual has no control. Delgado, and, consequently, Mr. Starling, maintains that humans are wholly natural beings. The “self” is a construct of the brain and the individual has no control over his thoughts, feelings, and purposes. This conforms to Mr. Starling’s own Nobel prize-winning experiment. His experiment showed that a strong social environment, even an unhealthy or “abnormal” environment, “could in time overwhelm the genetically determined responses of perfectly normal, healthy animals.”¹³⁹

Mr. Starling mentions Walter Reed, Madame Curie, and Jose Delgado as scientists who faced danger in conducting their experiments. But Mr. Starling clarifies that they did not exhibit courage, but its “obverse.”¹⁴⁰ Instead of fear of danger, they had

¹³⁷ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 306-07.

¹³⁸ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 425.

¹³⁹ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 2. For a full account of his experiment, see pages 1-2.

¹⁴⁰ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 423.

such great "faith in the empirical validity of their physical knowledge and their own powers of logic" and their "faith in rationalism" that they had no need of courage.¹⁴¹ By courage, Mr. Starling means the Aristotelian sense of courage as the virtue, or, more precisely, the disposition with respect to fear of death. For Aristotle, courageous acts are a sign of our freedom from necessity, but not freedom from fear. We greatly fear for our lives, but rise above fear and necessity through risking our lives. Consequently, this means that we choose our actions and that our choices are not determined by external or internal physical forces. Aristotle's moral virtues depend on his distinction between voluntary and involuntary acts. The former is "done under compulsion or through ignorance" whereas "the origin" of a voluntary act "lies in the agent who knows the particular circumstances in which he is acting."¹⁴² For acts to be free, the source, or origin, comes from within the individual. Aristotle qualifies that the individual chooses with self-awareness and knowledge of the circumstances in which he acts.

Mr. Starling's materialism denies the possibility of voluntary actions, because, according to him, there is no real "self" to feel fear. According to Mr. Starling, Madame Curie, Walter Reed, and Delgado had "no more fear than the conjurer who swallows fire."¹⁴³ To complete Mr. Starling's comparison, those who believe in virtuous action such as courage are like those who believe conjurers can really swallow fire. Actions only appear to be voluntary, because one cannot see the workings of the brain. Virtue is a rationalization constructed by the brain to explain the apparent freedom of its decisions.

¹⁴¹ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 423. Mr. Starling indicates that he has lectured before about rationalism and its history. However, the readers are not privy to these lectures.

¹⁴² Aristotle, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackam (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947), III.i.20.

¹⁴³ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 423.

Since voluntary action is impossible, according to Mr. Starling, there is no way for an individual to strike out on his own and resist the crowd.

For Aristotle, fear is good and healthy, because it means that there is self-awareness—consciousness of the self as a particular entity. Mr. Starling's scientists are weirdly unaware of themselves. In his lectures, however, Mr. Starling unintentionally affirms that there is a way to resist a dominant culture. Mr. Starling reserves special praise for José Delgado and his *persistence* in studying the functioning of the brain as the key to understanding human behavior *against* the dominant culture in the 1930s that favored Freudian psychoanalysis. According to Mr. Starling's model of human behavior, Delgado should have been a follower of Freud like others in his profession. In spite of Mr. Starling's strict materialism, he understands himself as a free being. Delgado's faith in rationalism gave him a way to transcend social pressure. Mr. Starling is unable to explain or even acknowledge how the scientist is free through his adherence to a higher truth. Like a conjurer revealing his trick, Mr. Starling lets his class in on the so-called truth. And like all conjurers, Mr. Starling succeeds with misdirection. Charlotte is so pleased with learning the trick that she never pauses to consider how Mr. Starling's account of Delgado's faith in rationalism and in his particular powers observation, reason and logic assume that there is a self.

Given Charlotte's past influences, combined with those of Dupont, we should not be surprised that her career at Dupont is not a happy one. At Dupont, Charlotte finds that her small town origins and modest means do not afford her the manners or possessions of the typical teenagers entering college. Like her hometown's namesake Sparta, she is

accustomed to strictness, simplicity, and austerity.¹⁴⁴ Charlotte is, at first, appalled by the lax self-deportment of her fellow students, their easy habits and morals, and their wealth of superfluous electronic devices and possessions. She is disgusted by co-ed dorms and bathrooms, the free use of profanity, and the special treatment accorded to student athletes. And she is disgusted by her roommate's frequent late nights, drunken behavior, and sexual partners. Charlotte feels contemptuously superior towards her fellow college students.

But contemptuous superiority is a poor surrogate for company and friendship. Soon loneliness, self-pity, and envy for the college students going out in the evening with their friends overwhelm Charlotte. She tries to take solace in her independence and capacity to adhere to the rigorous demands of concentration and dedication to strong academic achievement.¹⁴⁵ In her neuroscience course, she learns a radically materialistic account of human nature that explains that there is no such thing as a self, free will, and the soul. Lacking sufficient self-reflection, Charlotte fails to apply this teaching to herself and delights in this revelation that brings her membership to a small, select group of elite individuals who are in the know.

Through the exchange between Charlotte and Jojo on the meaning of liberal arts education, Wolfe illustrates how, in spite of her intelligence, Charlotte cannot hide how little she really understands—Wolfe, no doubt, suggests that many who mouth “liberal arts” do not understand anything about it. In conversation between Charlotte and Jojo, Charlotte explains to Jojo the etymology of liberal and historical meaning of liberal arts.

¹⁴⁴ “Self-discipline was one of the things that had always made Charlotte Simmons” (140).

¹⁴⁵ Charlotte takes comfort even in the most meager of common activity such taking a test with a group of students. During a test, she enjoys being so “engrossed in a task that made it impossible to think of...*how lonesome she was*” (italics in original, 189).

She tells him that the word liberal comes from the Latin word, *liber*, that means free and also book. She continues that the Romans used to educate slaves in practical sciences like mathematics and engineering so that slaves could be useful in building, and in music so that slaves could be entertaining. “[O]nly Roman citizen, the *free* people” could learn rhetoric, literature, history, theology and philosophy because these disciplines teach the art of persuasion (*italics in original*).¹⁴⁶ The Romans kept knowledge of the arts of persuasion—the liberal arts—to themselves, because they did not want the slaves to learn how to make arguments for their freedom.

Jojo immediately grasps the import of what Charlotte has explained. Jojo feels the sting of being treated like a slave. He realizes that easy classes for jocks are a way of treating the student athletes like slaves, because “thinking might distract [them] from what [they] were hired for.”¹⁴⁷ Jojo knows that he cannot remain in jock courses and be the stooge of the athletic department. Jojo does not hesitate about what he ought to do and takes action to enroll in a philosophy course called the “The Age of Socrates.” He openly confronts his coach, Coach Roth, to announce his decision. He tells Coach Roth: “I’m tired of—you know, skimming and scamming by the way I’ve been doing. I’m not just a stupid jock, I’m tired of treating myself like one!”¹⁴⁸ Jojo used to believe that his natural talent at basketball made him a “higher order student.”¹⁴⁹ Once aware that there is a superior standard to what passes for excellence at Dupont, Jojo is too proud to let

¹⁴⁶ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 195.

¹⁴⁷ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 196.

¹⁴⁸ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 203.

¹⁴⁹ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 57. Lawler observes that “Both Charlotte and Jojo think of themselves, not without reason, as natural aristocrats, distinguished fundamentally from almost all of humanity by their mental or physical excellence” in “Real Men,” 78.

himself be a slave and sets his sights on being free. In this way, Wolfe shows that it is possible for those who pursue a liberal education to receive one—even at a university like Dupont and by implication at America’s best Ivy League schools, which it was said to resemble.

Whereas Jojo is willing to change his habits and risk his friends and standing on the team for the sake of becoming a liberally educated adult, Charlotte—who can recite perfectly the Latin root of liberal and the historical origin of liberal art—shows through her speech and deeds that she does not believe that liberal education can teach freedom. When Charlotte tells Jojo that *liber* means free, she notes that *liber* also means book, but dismisses this fact as “coincidence.”¹⁵⁰ Books contain the arts of persuasion and encourage critical thinking so that, as our language reflects, reading books is closely related to being free. Jojo understands this connection, and, later in the novel, Wolfe shows him reading over Aristotle. Jojo longs for the kind of freedom from and transcendence over material necessity that the liberal arts promise. In contrast, Charlotte’s dedication to academic excellence diminishes as she gains more status in the eyes of her peers through her association with Hoyt. Academic excellence for Charlotte was never a way to achieve freedom and virtue, but perversely how she enslaved herself to the opinions of others. Charlotte’s education—both at Sparta and at Dupont—failed to instill in her a love of excellence and virtue that could stand up to and resist the easy immorality so prevalent among her peers.

In contrast to Charlotte, Jojo learns about how he must live to achieve happiness from studying the ancient Greek thinkers Plato and Socrates. Jojo looks to Socrates to give him guidance on happiness and especially likes Socrates's advice "[i]f a man

¹⁵⁰ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 195.

debauches himself, believing this will bring him happiness, then he errs from ignorance, not knowing what true happiness is."¹⁵¹ Smugly, Jojo "began to enjoy the bracing virtue of self-denial" and is in danger of thinking himself superior to his fellow basketball players.¹⁵² Yet, Jojo learns from reading Aristotle that humans being are more complicated and so their happiness requires more than reason, but also virtue—the inward, habitual disposition of the soul toward the passions. Jojo reads that Aristotle criticizes Socrates for overlooking the irrational parts of the soul that lead individuals to do what they know to be wrong. Jojo realizes the conflict on happiness. Is happiness knowledge and so those who are unhappy are those who are ignorant? Or, is there more to happiness than knowledge, because "moral weakness" might lead individuals do what they know is wrong?¹⁵³ Jojo, who had been leaning in favor of Socrates's understanding of happiness, soon learns that he is capable of moral weakness when a girl enters his hotel room and seduces him. Jojo learns that Aristotelian virtue provides a correction to Socrates's understanding of happiness as knowledge. Wolfe draws out a lesson that what distinguishes individuals is not their ability to reason—or superior natural intelligence as Charlotte thinks or superior natural athletic skill as Jojo had thought—so much as it is their virtue. All human beings share the same passions and desires, but it is how we choose to respond to our passions that distinguishes us and gives us claim to merit and praise.

During her depression that follows her humiliating first sexual experience with Hoyt, Charlotte comes the closest to the kind of self-reflective inquiry that would lead her

¹⁵¹ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 641.

¹⁵² Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 641.

¹⁵³ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 642.

to discover new grounds for pursuing virtue and excellence. The old maxim, “I am Charlotte Simmons,” that used to reassure her that she was an individual without equal—above the herd—who did not stoop to the base animal level of her fellow students fails to bring her any comfort. Charlotte hits it with a hammer or tuning fork, as Nietzsche’s Zarathustra sounded the idols, and hears it ring hollow. She realizes “what a pathetic, what a feeble piece of self-delusion” it was for her to believe that she was so constituted by nature that she did not share with her fellow peers the same longings, needs, and weaknesses.¹⁵⁴ That Charlotte submitted to her desires and had sex with Hoyt vividly shows how susceptible she is to the same passions that govern her peers. Her superior natural intelligence combined with the education she received in Sparta encouraged her to believe that she transcended her lusts and desires. Consequently, Charlotte thought she did not need self-control, but could exert control over Hoyt. In fact, Charlotte deeply lacks self-discipline and had always been restrained and guided by the opinions of others—such as her teachers and the community in Sparta and the students at Dupont. The moment is ripe for Charlotte, like Jojo, to realize a surer ground for virtue, excellence, and happiness.

Throughout Charlotte’s depression, Adam Gellin, a young aspiring intellectual who is attracted to her, shows Charlotte the best of friendship and helps her recover. Charlotte calls Adam “my only friend,” and confides exclusively to him the whole story about losing her virginity to Hoyt. Adam diligently takes care of her and eventually helps Charlotte recover, thus demonstrating that what Charlotte needed was a friend—someone with whom she could confide, who could see her at her worst, and who would protect, soothe, and give her timely amounts of “tough love.” Despite the extensive time,

¹⁵⁴ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 617.

devotion, and self-denial (of his own romantic interest in her) that Adam gives Charlotte as he succors her into recovery, Charlotte conveniently forgets it and returns to believing the old lie that she is a . Comparing herself to the phoenix, Charlotte tells herself that “[s]he had risen from the ashes. I *am* Charlotte Simmons again, but a Charlotte Simmons who has walked over the coals and through the flames” (italics in original).¹⁵⁵ She has not learned that she is not the self-created and singular being that the mythical phoenix is. In Sparta, Charlotte received the support of her family, friends, and community, and at Dupont, Adam encourages and helps her. Charlotte credits only herself for her success and resurrection. When Adam faces academic ruin and the opportunity arises for Charlotte to give him care and friendly support, she perfunctorily reciprocates. Soon she wearies and resents helping him. Charlotte cannot bear helping Adam, because it reminds her that she owes him for her recovery—a fact that she tries to suppress to herself. It exposes the lie contained in her self-asserted, but ultimately superficial maxim “I am Charlotte Simmons.” Charlotte’s so-called recovery is an unfortunate regression and missed opportunity to look into who she is.

When Charlotte is unable to explain the dramatic drop in her grades to her mother, Mrs. Simmons sturdily says, “[s]ounds to me like what you need right now is a talk with your own soul, an honest talk.”¹⁵⁶ Charlotte never has a talk with her soul, because, as Mr. Starling taught her, the “soul” in quotations indicates that “it was only a superstitious belief in the first place, an earlier, yet more primitive name for the ghost in the machine.”¹⁵⁷ But Wolfe does show us a conversation between Charlotte and her

¹⁵⁵ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 668.

¹⁵⁶ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 722.

¹⁵⁷ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 737.

“soul” in quotations. By denying her “self,” her “self” has not withered away or disappeared. Charlotte is haunted by her “soul,” and with every assertion of ‘I am Charlotte Simmons,’ it asks ‘[y]es, but what does that mean? Who *is* she?’ (italics in original).¹⁵⁸ Charlotte draws a blank. She is unable to think of any way in which she is different, special, or set apart from the crowd. But secretly she knows that ‘what she wanted all along was to be considered special and to be admired for that in itself, no matter how she achieved it.’¹⁵⁹ As Jojo’s girlfriend, Charlotte achieves the status she wanted, but she is troubled, unhappy, and privately doubtful.

In the crucial final scene of the novel, Charlotte, as Jojo’s girlfriend, attends one of his basketball games in which he is the star player. She enjoys sitting on the bleachers where she imagines that the audience credit her for Jojo’s excellence and academic turn around. She takes pride in the thought that people believed she “had the giant whipped.”¹⁶⁰ This is another indication of how Charlotte has returned to thinking that she has control over others—particularly, control over another’s sexual desire for her. Charlotte believes she is at her apex, but rather Wolfe shows us that she is sadly self-deluded. Jojo is not Charlotte’s trained dog, but he has learned how to control his passions and desires. On the contrary, Charlotte has yet to learn control over her sexual desires. Moreover, Charlotte believes that she has achieved the status she wanted, but Wolfe shows us that instead of being distinctive or apart from the crowd, Charlotte has become one of the crowd. At the beginning of the novel, Charlotte stood before her graduating class and gave the valedictorian speech, and, at the novel’s close, Charlotte

¹⁵⁸ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 737.

¹⁵⁹ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 737.

¹⁶⁰ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 732.

sits among a crowd of basketball fans who pay no attention to her, but watch Jojo play his best. Charlotte's empty maxim "I am Charlotte Simmons" fails provide her with the support for virtue and the personal pride and integrity to resist the crowd. By the novel's final line, Charlotte sings with the crowd, because, as Wolfe tells us, "[i]t obviously behooved Jojo Johanssen's girlfriend to join in."¹⁶¹ Through the course of the novel, Charlotte loses any understanding of who she is till she has little independent identity from the crowd.

Conclusion

Over the course of his three novels, Wolfe's writings indicate that the individual pursuit of happiness—even in the move away from one social group—is not necessarily into a state of isolation from others, but is a move with other people into a new social group. Americans enjoy the freedom to leave one social group and join or create another that shares similar values and interests. For Wolfe, the possibility of leaving one social group and finding or founding another society guided by different rules and morals for achieving status distinguishes the American regime from socially stratified nations and, furthermore, makes the pursuit of happiness possible. For example, Wolfe says that *Anna Karenina* is "Tolstoy's concept of the heart at war with the structure of society."¹⁶² Wolfe supposes that if Tolstoy's Anna and Vronsky were contemporary New Yorkers, they could have moved in with each other with much less fuss.¹⁶³ However, Wolfe quickly adds that America society still exerts considerable pressure on the hearts of individuals

¹⁶¹ Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 738.

¹⁶² Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," 51.

¹⁶³ "Anna would just move in with Vronsky, and people in their social set would duly note the change in their Scully & Scully address books; and the arrival of the baby, if they chose to have it, would occasion no more than a grinning snigger in the gossip columns (51)."

that “provides an infinite number of new agonies for the Annas and Vronskys of the Upper East Side.”¹⁶⁴ For Wolfe, pursuing happiness means standing up to public opinion and striking out on one’s own. In the absence of class structure, Wolfe recognizes the tenacious hold public opinion has over individuals and how ill-equipped individuals are to go against society. His characters must learn to forego their status with one group and find another, friendlier group—one that probably will be frowned upon (or at least regarded as a bit loony) by mainstream society. When Sherman, Charlie, and Conrad find the courage to pursue happiness, society considers them a bit crazy. The epilogues in both novels reveal the extent to which orthodox society regards Sherman, Charlie, and Conrad to be nut and outside social norms. Wolfe admires counter-cultural and odd-ball pursuers of happiness for their courage.

In contrast, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* does not have an epilogue that presents a view of Charlotte as she appears to her peers. Instead of being the outsider from the mountains of Sparta, Charlotte fits in and takes her place in the crowd at the basketball game. Since Charlotte appears to be one of the crowd, Wolfe must reveal her inner thoughts to the reader so as to show how Charlotte has rejected the task of self-examination demanded by her soul. But *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is not a wholly unhappy ending. Wolfe shows us her internal struggle—despite her efforts she cannot suppress partial knowledge and awareness of the lie she lives. Her story is not complete. Hope remains for Charlotte both because she yet has a long life ahead of her and through her relationship with Jojo, which I will discuss below.

The more positive development both in *I Am Charlotte Simmons* and in Wolfe’s critique of the pursuit of happiness is Jojo’s turn toward Aristotelian virtue. Jojo

¹⁶⁴ Wolfe, “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast,” 51.

represents a unique hero among Wolfe's characters, because he does not leave society to pursue happiness. Instead, Jojo take charge both of himself, leads others to change, and restores order. Jojo confronts his coach, Coach Roth, about his decision to enroll in an upper level philosophy course, which he vehemently opposes. Later, however, Coach Roth praises Jojo and says he is proud of Jojo.¹⁶⁵ Throughout much of the novel, Jojo feared that an underclassman basketball player would out shine him and displace him on the basketball team. Jojo learns to control his fear and assume his place as the preeminent star. By the end of the novel, Jojo enjoys the promise of the liberal arts—he has learned how to live as a free person. Moreover, by remaining in society, Jojo may inspire others and contribute to restoring—at least in part—the liberal arts at Dupont.

That Jojo remains in society and at the top of society represents a new, more moderate possibility in Wolfe's thought to the pursuit of happiness than the alternative presented by Sherman, Charlie, and Conrad. For Sherman, Charlie, and Conrad, their societies are so disordered and out of touch with promoting meaningful human goods that their only hope is to live in opposition, like Sherman, or as outsiders on the fringe, like Charlie and Conrad. In contrast, Jojo is triumphant at the end of the novel. He succeeds in living well and participating in society—not just as a part, but as a leader and model for others. He can imagine society better and is capable of not only restoring it, but creating new possibilities. Jojo knew that he did not want to be a slavish entertainer as a dumb jock basketball player and so took action to pursue a liberal arts education without giving up basketball. Jojo brings together academics and athletics—skills that are only coincidentally found in the same person—and so raises in the minds of those around him

¹⁶⁵ See Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, 561-62.

respect for liberal arts and philosophy.¹⁶⁶ Jojo plays basketball not as a slavish entertainer, but as one who has learned self-control of his passions and self-discipline of his body. A test of his ability to restore order will be to help Charlotte. In the glimpse into Charlotte's thoughts, the reader learns that she believes she restrains Jojo sexually, but we have only Charlotte's word on it. It is more likely that Jojo and Charlotte are learning self-restraint together.

Despite having political freedom, individuals face tremendous pressure to pursue goals, such as wealth and power, that society esteems, but that are unlikely to bring happiness. More troubling is that Wolfe does not identify support for courage within our official documents. Support for courage must come from alternative resources compatible, or at least, able to coexist with liberalism. Wolfe turns to ancient philosophies to provide his characters with the foundation for courageous action, and to highlight modernity's insufficient supports for courageous and virtuous action that support a more meaningful concept of happiness than basic human comforts. Yet, Wolfe does not simply champion ancient thought without question. As shown in *A Man in Full*, Wolfe puts ancient courage in service of the modern individual to resist public opinion and to pursue happiness. Conrad decides that the stoics believed wrongly that one's life so much resembled a prison that one could not intervene against abusive and arbitrary force for the sake of another's well-being. Stoic freedom and courage have no further purpose than the individual's private and internal happiness. The stoics underestimated what humans can do to improve our lives and the lives of others with respect to the political conditions under which we live. Conrad's defense of the

¹⁶⁶ Jojo is not the only example of an earnest student-athlete in the novel. Charles, the basketball team's captain, commanded great respect for his coolness (see page 45), but secretly hid his more studious side from view.

victimized young man in the prison is based on a liberal belief that the primary ingredient to living well is being free of arbitrary and illegitimate force.

In *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Wolfe turns to the ancient Greeks and the conflict between Athens and Sparta. If stoics relied too heavily on internal restraint for happiness and resistance to negative influences, Charlotte's modern Sparta succeeds only with external restraints and rewards. Once removed from Sparta, Charlotte lacks the necessary internal self-discipline to resist the immoral ways of her peers at Dupont. Mrs. Simmons's advice for her daughter to remember that she is from Sparta is too feeble and shallow a support for virtue for Charlotte. Charlotte is too smart for simple rustic pride in her hometown, because she sees how her origins cannot explain her intelligence. She seems greater than where she came from and falls for Miss Pennington's easy Nietzschean teachings that she is destined for great things. Neither Sparta nor Nietzsche can provide Charlotte with the knowledge of who she is for the sake of resisting her peers and creating new possibilities under which to live. Instead, Charlotte succumbs to peer pressure and Mr. Starling's neuroscience that promises to explain who she is through radical materialism. Athens, and particularly Aristotle, however, corrects deficiencies in the stoicism and in Sparta. Wolfe turns Aristotle over the stoics and Sparta for its superior support for virtue and recognition that we need others to help us against internal moral weakness and in the pursuit of virtue and happiness.

In the next chapter, we will revisit stoicism's influence in American thought, particularly in the old South, as described by Walker Percy. Like Wolfe, Percy recognizes much merit in stoicism as a resource within the United States to resist our worst tendencies toward materialism, individualism, and alienation. However, whereas Wolfe adjusts stoicism, Percy rejects stoicism for failing to provide a meaningful

correction of liberalism and turns toward more transcendent, religious sources. More fully developed in Percy's writings than in Wolfe's, Percy also considers science and scientific thought as a danger to our understanding as free beings.

CHAPTER THREE

Walker Percy's Critique of the Pursuit of Happiness

Wolfe believes post-World War II prosperity, on the whole, is a good development that gave ordinary Americans the money and free time to pursue their interests. In contrast, Walker Percy maintains that prosperity has not increased happiness, but instead cast into sharper relief our unhappiness. Unquestionably, modernity has succeeded in delivering humanity from much of the material want and uncertainty present in the natural world and previous political orders. Americans have exercised magnificently the right to pursue happiness. Americans enjoy, on the whole, comfortable lives and unprecedented political and personal freedom. Yet, the individual suffers an “embarrassment of riches.”¹ He knows he ought to be happy but is not. The apparent triumph over the causes of human misery—material scarcity and arbitrary government—serve to make more pointed and acute the feeling of lingering unhappiness. All the material and political conditions of happiness seem to be in place, but the happy person.

In this respect, Percy's observations resemble many of those made by happiness researchers. Americans enjoy unprecedented economic growth and prosperity, but yet happiness levels remain flat. As shown in chapter 1, happiness researchers such as Easterlin, Layard, and Bok believe that Americans, falsely overestimating the extent to which money contributes to happiness, pursue wealth to the detriment of securing and enjoying other goods. While certainly in agreement that Americans tend to seek

¹ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York, Picador: 1983), 74.

happiness in material goods, Percy, in contrast, does not try to pin unhappiness exclusively on the excessive pursuit of wealth. Unhappiness cannot be removed by simply redirecting Americans towards other pursuits. The main problem, as Percy sees it, is the pursuit of happiness itself. Americans strive to be something that they are not. Percy recognizes that the flip side of the pursuit of happiness is the fleeing of unhappiness. Caught in the middle, we Americans neglect to consider what our discontent tells us about ourselves.

Percy identifies modern science and Southern stoicism as our likely alternatives to the pursuit of happiness, but finds limits to both approaches. Modern science, with which Percy would identify much happiness research, assumes that unhappiness has a solution. Social scientists treat unhappiness like a hindrance to be removed, transcended, or medicated out of existence. Scientific solutions to unhappiness end up relying on ways to suppress the individual's perception of unhappiness, and, Percy argues, also suppress the individual self. On the other hand, Southern stoicism appears to confront human unhappiness with unflinching resolve. The stoic does not expect to be happy and, indeed, accepts unhappiness as a noble burden. But, as Percy recognizes, stoicism also shies away from discovering what unhappiness tells us about ourselves.

Instead of treating unhappiness like a problem to be solved or a burden to be shouldered, Percy explains that we must confront unhappiness, which means taking it as a fortunate starting point for self-reflective inquiry, or the search, as Percy calls it. The discovery that our unhappiness holds a precious clue to understanding ourselves can be a relief from much frustration and anxiety of not being happy. Moreover, by focusing on understanding unhappiness, Percy elevates the importance of the search itself. Instead of the solitary pursuit of happiness, which cares little about the means the pursuit other than

efficiency that ends in restlessness, the search focuses on the manner and means of the search itself instead of the object of the search. Foremost, Percy argues that our unhappiness points us toward sharing, discussing, and searching with others. In this respect, Percy offers a political answer (not to be confused with a solution) in which the search with others amends the pursuit of happiness.

The first book length study of Percy's then only three novels, Martin Luschei's *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise*, framed much subsequent literary criticism by understanding Percy exclusively as an existential writer influenced by European thinkers.² Although other causes contribute to our malaise, according to Luschei, the American "scientific outlook" exacerbates our sense of alienation, because the scientific method cannot look critically upon itself and so "becomes an agent of alienation."³ Luschei maintains that Percy shares with Alexis de Tocqueville the observation that Americans are Cartesians.⁴ Americans are so thoroughly Cartesians and have such an "exclusive faith in the scientific method" that, according to Luschei, Percy came to see the flaw in the American perspective by reading

² Martin, Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972). Another notable Percy scholar, Lewis A. Lawson also established Percy's existential credentials. Lawson argued that Percy's use of humor and satire to expose a malaise that can only be indirectly communicated linked his thought to Søren Kierkegaard in Lewis A. Lawson, "Walker Percy's Indirect Communications," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 11 (1969): 867-900. See Jerome Taylor, *In Search of Self: Life, Death, and Walker Percy* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1986); Mary Deems Howland's *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel's Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy's Novels* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1990); Panthea Reid Broughton, ed., *The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); Jac Tharpe, ed., *Walker Percy: Art and Ethics* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1980); John F. Zeugner, "Walker Percy and Gabriel Marcel: The Castaway and the Wayfarer," *Mississippi Quarterly* 28 (1974): 21-53; Bradley R. Dewey, "Walker Percy Talks about Kierkegaard," *Journal of Religion* 54 (1974): 273-98; Mary K. Sweeny, *Walker Percy and the Postmodern World* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987), Patricia Lewis Poteat, *Walker Percy and the Old Modern Age: Reflections on Language, Argument, and the Telling of Stories* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

³ Luschei, 19.

⁴ See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (London: Folio Society, 2002), 2.1.1.

Kierkegaard and other primarily European existential thinkers.⁵ Percy's novels, Luschei argues, present "existential modes of perception" to the American reader for the sake of "penetrate[ing] the malaise."⁶ The Cartesian-scientific outlook can only be pierced by importing and adapting decidedly foreign modes of self-understanding.

Considering Luschei's influence on Percy scholars, J. Donald Crowley observes that many American scholars valued Percy most as their own homegrown existentialist who was a "supremely talented translator of European ideas into facts and fictions that bore on native conditions."⁷ Unsurprisingly, American scholars who followed Luschei's critique of Percy found little very American or political in his writings.⁸ In contrast, Crowley observes that European commentators on Percy recognized "an indelible Americanness in Percy."⁹ Following their lead, Crowley argues that Percy's examination of existential questions puts him firmly within one of the oldest American literary traditions. Like many American authors before him, Percy recognizes how the Puritans, who found themselves in the strange new world and uprooted from the familiar, "were constructing out of their indigenous experience responses profoundly existential."¹⁰ In light of the Puritans' essentially existential experience, Crowley argues, American authors have long since found inventive ways to explore how to place the self in the

⁵ Luschei, 20.

⁶ Luschei, 20.

⁷ J. Donald Crowley, "Walker Percy: The Continuity of the Complex Fate," in *Critical Essays on Walker Percy*, eds. Crowley and Crowley, (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1989), 18.

⁸ For example, Cecil L. Eubanks interprets Percy so as to identify him with Kierkegaard and argues that "political activity must inevitably be regarded as another form of the dreaded abstraction" in "Walker Percy: Eschatology and the Politics of Grace" *The Southern Quarterly* 18 (1980): 124. Since politics is simply an abstraction, Eubanks concludes, it is "fundamentally incompatible with the searchings of the sovereign wayfarer" (126).

⁹ Crowley, 18.

¹⁰ Crowley, 262.

world. For example, Washington Irving made famous the story of the famous absentee Rip Van Winkle who returns to his hometown to find it much changed in his absence. Ralph Waldo Emerson tried to overcome the existential predicament by creating the American Scholar so as to place the American within this new world and country. Crowley notes other examples by Melville, Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, Whitman, and Fitzgerald who explore through their writings our precarious placement in the world as Americans and individuals. Americans are not complete Cartesians, but, instead, thanks in part America's peculiar arrival in the New World, Americans are frequently lead to consider who they are and a strong literary tradition casts much self-reflection upon the American founding.

Our unhappiness, as Walker Percy understands, can either lead us to search for more sophisticated diversions or, as he hopes, guide us to understand ourselves as lost beings in need of each other so as to recover ourselves from becoming empty modern abstractions of the individual. As will be shown in *The Moviegoer*, *Lost in the Cosmos*, and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy repeatedly shows his characters rejecting the pursuit of happiness, embarking on a search, and discovering their need for others. Percy's critique of the failure of the pursuit of happiness to satisfy the needs of the human person as a social being remains constant through his novels. *The Moviegoer* plainly illustrates how the diversions of the pursuit of happiness only fill time without fulfilling the individual and isolate the individual from others. In *Lost in the Cosmos* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy focuses on how the pursuit of happiness risks leading us away from political life toward rule by experts and destruction of the self in the name of increasing well-being. I now turn to *The Moviegoer* in which Percy shows how Binx Bolling discovers the search and finds his way as a fellow wayfarer.

The Moviegoer

The Moviegoer is the story of a young man, John Bickerson “Binx” Bolling, who is called upon by his formidable Aunt Emily to decide what to do with his life. At nearly thirty years old, Binx has had undistinguished career as a failed researcher, veteran of the Korean War, and currently as a prosperous, but banal stockbroker. Aunt Emily, however, aspires for her nephew to pursue greatness, to reject the mean, low way of American bourgeois life, and to accept his duty to make a meaningful contribution to humanity such as a doctor. Emily asks him “[d]on’t you feel obliged to use your brain and to make a contribution?”¹¹ Binx does not feel under any such obligation. Since his return from the Korean War, Binx moved away from his aunt’s house in New Orleans’s Garden District to the nondescript suburbs, Gentilly, and gave up all pretenses to “grand ambitions.”¹² Instead of great ambitions, Binx carefully cultivates the “ordinary life,” or, as he also calls it, his “Little Way.”¹³ Binx claims that he is “a model tenant and a model citizen and takes pleasure in doing all that is expected of [him]” as a typical American everyman.¹⁴ He has all the usual plastic cards in his wallet; he responsibly stores important documents like his birth certificate in a fire proof box, and he subscribes to *Consumer Reports* to own the most efficient products. He conscientiously follows radio

¹¹ Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Vintage International, 1998) 53.

¹² Percy, *Moviegoer*, 9.

¹³ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 9 and 99. Terrye Newkirk notes that by using “Little Way” to describe his life, Binx “burlesques” St. Thérèse’s “Little Way of spiritual childhood” in which her goal is “to live everyday life with great heroism” in “*Via Negativa* and the Little Way: The Hidden God of *The Moviegoer*,” *Renascence* 44 (1992): 190 and 191. In contrast, Binx’s “Little Way” intentionally avoids any hint of heroism. Binx’s “Little Way” uses ordinary life as a shield to hide from his aunt’s hopes for glorious and grand deeds. Binx’s “Little Way” diminishes ordinary life for the sake of living an undistinguished life in contrast to how St. Thérèse’s “Little Way” elevates ordinary life.

¹⁴ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 6.

public service announcements that advise against littering. In addition to honoring customarily American concerns for security, responsibility, and frugality, Binx whiles away his time seducing his secretaries and going to the movies.

The marquee at the theatre Binx frequents proudly advertises "Where Happiness Costs So Little."¹⁵ Such happiness as Binx pursues in his anonymous suburbs is chimerical, because, as Allen observes, "happiness so cheaply bought is worth very little."¹⁶ Indeed, the so-called "happiness" Binx enjoys with his secretaries fades quickly—soon they are tired of each and part gladly.¹⁷ Binx's cultivation of the "ordinary life" is ultimately unsuccessful, Luschei observes, because he is "ironically self-aware."¹⁸ Binx cannot submerge himself entirely by role playing the good citizen, tenant, and anonymous everyman. Too reflective and self-conscious of his role playing, Binx knows that his life in suburbs is "the worst kind of self-deception."¹⁹ Binx cannot remain tucked away in the dreamy, submerged comfort of Gentilly.

The search, an alternative to Emily's plan and Binx's "ordinary life," is heralded by "clues."²⁰ These "clues," like the contents of his pockets that although familiar objects are suddenly strange and wondrous, remind Binx to "pursue the search."²¹ Binx struggles to follow his search's clues (he still seduces his newest secretary), and his

¹⁵ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 7.

¹⁶ William Rodney Allen, *Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 25.

¹⁷ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 8.

¹⁸ Luschei, 75.

¹⁹ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 18.

²⁰ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 11.

²¹ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 11.

efforts are unsteady until he realizes that his cousin, Kate, is a fellow searcher who can bring steadiness and a kind of happiness to their joint search.

Binx associates the pursuit of happiness with “everydayness,” which he characterizes as the immersion of the self into the role as a consumer of goods, services, hobbies, and expert advice.²² Everydayness is the way of living out the pursuit of happiness that devolves into little more than a pursuit of distraction from the despair that stirs frenetically within most Americans. Everydayness is the “enemy” of the search, because individuals lost in everydayness do not know that there is anything to search for.²³ Everydayness prevents us from undertaking our peculiarly human task to seek an answer to the discontent we feel. In *The Moviegoer*, the chief representatives of everydayness are Nell and Eddie Lovell. Binx comments that Eddie “understands everything out there and everything out there is something to be understood.”²⁴ For the Lovells, the world is “something to be categorized and explained, then dismissed” as they occupy themselves pursuing happiness.²⁵ The pursuit of happiness disconnects them from seeking to understand the world and their place within it. They have outsourced examination of the world to experts and so are “free” to pursue happiness as they please. The Lovells give themselves over to consumer immanence through products and pre-packaged experiences and hobbies. The freedom to pursue happiness turns out to be freedom from the burden of dealing with self. As Percy makes clear, the pursuit of happiness does not succeed in bringing the Lovells contentment, but serves to distract the

²² Percy, *Moviegoer*, 13.

²³ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 145.

²⁴ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 19.

²⁵ Barbara Filippidis, “Vision and the Journey to Selfhood in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*,” *Renascence* 33 (1980): 13.

Lovells from undertaking their peculiarly human task to seek an answer to the discontent they feel.

The pursuit of happiness is the attempt to make the self happy by the possession of goods. The individual can make himself happy by possessing the things that are supposed to constitute the happy life. Percy's insight is that the liberal formulation of happiness—primarily understood as security, control, and comfort—defines the objects of the individual's pursuit and, in so doing, prevents the individual from being open to consider other goods and conditions for human happiness. In distinction, Binx's search is characterized by clues that point to an unknown final end—“[t]o be aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something.”²⁶ That something remains incompletely described. Binx finds “clues,” but we readers do not know what they are clues of. Binx is onto what? Binx finds clues of what? Binx searches for what? Percy does not fill in the blank. Binx flatly refuses to say that he seeks God or thing else definite.²⁷ Binx cannot say for what he searches or to what the clues point, because then he would know the object of his search. To name it would be to know what it is. When Sherlock Holmes finds muddy footprints next to a stabbed corpse, he knows to look for a murderer. The identity of the particular individual is a detail that, if not known now, is theoretically possible to be known—to wit, Holmes always discovers the murderer. If Binx knew what the clues indicated, then he would not be searching anymore. The impossibility of saying what the search is allows it to be a true search. Binx's search remains open-ended. The importance of defining the ultimate end of the search recedes from view and instead the way in which one searches with others assumes more significance.

²⁶ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 13.

²⁷ See Percy, *Moviegoer*, 13.

Binx's aunt, Emily, however, is unconvinced and believes Binx spends his time doing nothing worthwhile. Emily witnesses Binx wandering around, going to movies, seducing secretaries, and, worst of all, being unable to explain himself.²⁸ If Emily narrated the novel, we readers would likely agree with her that Binx is an idler. The time has come, she tells him, to choose what to do with his life. Emily fulfills an important function in the novel—she calls Binx to action, and by the end of the novel Binx takes action (though not in the manner she desired). Binx ceases his ordinary life escapism, rejects her stoicism, comes to understand his search as a way of living in the world, marries Kate, and decides to go to medical school. Without Emily's prompting, it is doubtful that Binx could have made these decisions by himself.

Like Wolfe, Percy considers stoicism as a possible tonic to liberalism that encourages the individual to treasure inner dignity, to face up to hardships, but still to act nobly within limited horizons. Stoicism is an attractive alternative. Stoicism appeals to humanity's loftier motivations for greatness, honor, and courage. With commanding resolve, stoicism squarely looks eye to eye with life and its hardships. Most appealingly, stoicism already has some roots in American culture and, according to Percy, once held sway in Southern culture to a greater extent than Christianity.²⁹

However, Emily's stoicism is not like Conrad and Charlie's stoicism. Whereas Wolfe makes stoicism amenable to liberalism so as to correct or supplement liberalism, Emily's stoicism resists and opposes it, like an enemy. Her stoicism is more inspired by

²⁸ Emily never understands Binx's search and Binx never succeeds in finding right words to explain it.

²⁹ Walker Percy, "Stoicism in the South," *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Picador, 1991). See also Lewis A. Lawson's "Walker Percy's Southern Stoic," *The Southern Literary Journal* 3 (1970): 5-31.

Marcus Aurelius, the grim Emperor who fought long years to keep barbarians from Rome, rather than Epictetus, the slave who found inner freedom in being a spark of Zeus.³⁰ As a grand, fine, aristocratic Southern woman, Emily sees her way of life dying. According to her, the United State's democratic and liberal ideals and institutions represent the triumph of the common man over the great man. Praise for the common man is just the open praise of vulgarity and mediocrity. She disparages contemporary Americans for their easy sentimentality, lack of national character, and penchant to excuse immorality. Americans are soft, watery, and weak. In contrast to American liberalism and Conrad's democratic stoicism, Emily proudly proclaims that her people are "better because we do not shirk our obligations either to ourselves or to others."³¹ Her "gentlefolk" faces up to the grim realities of life and bears it with courage and magnanimity.³² Living at the end of civilization, as Emily believes, provides occasions for great demonstrations of stoical resolve. Emily declares to Binx that she prefers "to fade out of the picture" than be a part of a ruined civilization.³³ She is content that "we live by our lights, we die by our lights, and whoever the high gods may be, we'll look them in the eye without apology."³⁴

Despite her grim forecast, Emily's resolve heightens the attractiveness of stoicism as an alternative to the submerged life of everydayness like Nell and Eddie Lovell and by extension Americans generally. Her speech stirs up human pride against the so-called

³⁰ Emily sends Binx a letter bearing the words of Marcus Aurelius exhorting him "to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity" (78).

³¹ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 223.

³² Percy, *Moviegoer*, 222.

³³ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 224.

³⁴ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 224.

happiness of the Lovells that resembles the contentedness of pigs. The Lovells fill their time with pastimes and diversions—theatre readings and redecorating. Emily offers hardship instead of comfort, risk instead of security, and transcendent, glorious aspirations instead of low and achievable goals. Through Emily, Percy “strike[s] telling blows at some of the more absurd flaws of contemporary civilization.”³⁵ Emily reminds us that happiness at the cost of nobler aspirations that neglects our desire to transcend our individual selves is no happiness.

Emily likens the United States’s ignoble perversity of order and right to a second fall of Rome. She announces that “the age of Catos is gone” and ask rhetorically the “barbarians [are] at the inner gate and who defends the West?”³⁶ By comparing the end of the genteel South with the fall of Rome, she transcends the historical particulars of the South’s decline and sees herself taking part in the eternal struggle between civilization and barbarism. By raising and educating Binx, she believed she imparted to him the last remaining vestiges of the greatness and nobility of Western culture. Emily wants Binx to be courageous, spirited, ambitious and able to make a stand against the vulgarity and mediocrity she sees overtaking the fine, old ways. Emily offers Binx a place alongside her as a comrade in arms.

As Binx realizes, at the bottom of his aunt’s noble community of comrades in arms is self-deception. Emily does not see people as they are. She “transfigures everyone” and projects a romanticized image or role upon them to act out.³⁷ She sees the black servant, Mercer, as the “faithful retainer, a living connection with a bygone age,”

³⁵ Filippdis, 11.

³⁶ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 49 and 33.

³⁷ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 49.

but, as Binx tells us, he thives from her and social climbs among the city's black population.³⁸ She imagines that her husband, Jules, and friend of the family, Sam Yerger, are the last of the Catos. Jules is a successful merchant (the "City of Man" has been good to him) and Sam is a Hemingway-like writer. She imagines a false community in which the people near her are the last of the good and true and that together they stand against the barbarians. Moreover, so well does Emily transform people into either "the heroic or the craven" that they come to understand themselves as she does.³⁹ Emily expects Binx to accept a role. When Binx was eight, his elder brother died, and she admonished him to "act like a soldier."⁴⁰ Binx questions if that "[w]as that all I had to do?"⁴¹ As an adult, Emily tells him to be "as a Roman and a man."⁴² Emily constructs, as one commenter notes, a "world bottomed on the principle not of fulfillment but of performance."⁴³ Playing a part is easy, but, as Binx suspects, the actor hides himself in the role and becomes a part in someone else's—in this case, Emily's—production. Binx already recoils from the pursuit of happiness's life of diversion, because the self tries to divert itself from its despair. Emily's stoicism is simply a better diversion.

Emily cannot understand Binx's search, because she has no doubt of the right course of action—to do one's duty. For the stoic, the question of what to do with the self is closed and there is little room for self-reflective inquiry. Unhappiness is accepted as a

³⁸ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 23.

³⁹ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 49.

⁴⁰ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 4.

⁴¹ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 4.

⁴² Percy, *Moviegoer*, 78.

⁴³ Richard Pindell, "Basking in the Eye of the Storm: The Esthetics of Loss in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*," *boundary 2* 4 (1975): 222.

fact of life, but, as Binx realizes, accepting unhappiness is not the same as trying to find out what it reveals about the self. Southern stoicism is philosophical resignation—the path to further inquiry is shut. The Southern stoic, like the liberal pursuer of happiness, remains alienated from seriously seeking to understand the self’s peculiar existence.

The search, as Percy shows us, provides a real alternative to the pursuit of happiness that stoicism cannot give. The individual learns how to be himself thorough realizing his need of and dependency on others. The pursuer of happiness views other individuals as goods, or objects, to be possessed for the sake of happy life. The individual does not need others to help or join him in his pursuit of happiness. This is why, for Percy, the pursuit of happiness is a non-starter. Individuals, according to Percy, are not self-sufficient, but rather are dependent and in need of each other to live well. The stumbling block to the pursuit of happiness is that it is a lonely pursuit that isolates him from others. Despite the modern exaltation of autonomy, dependency and need are not negative qualities. Instead, for Binx, they become happy, or fortunate, conditions for individuals to gain the help they need from each other. As long as the individual persists in doggedly pursuing happiness by himself, he cannot become or be happy. But, as Percy emphasizes especially in *Lost in the Cosmos* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the danger does not end here—it cannot be contained within the private life of the unhappy individual pursuer of happiness, but may cancerously spread to the social and political body. The lonely pursuer of happiness, overcome with despair, may turn to violence and self-destruction. Fortunately for Binx, the sight of Kate looking for him stops him from descending into the despair. Binx realizes that Kate is like himself—a being who is also troubled and in need of help to live well. Binx wakes up from his “role-playing”; he sees Kate as it were for the first time “as a human being in an ontological predicament

identical to his own."⁴⁴ The search can be shared and unites individuals in a common activity not focused on happiness but that brings felicity. Kate and he find their way to happiness not by looking for it, but by finding each other.

As Mary Grabar notes, Kate is “further along” in the search than Binx.⁴⁵ Kate recognizes before Binx does that they share a common problem. Kate knows that her step-mother, Emily, is wrong about Binx being a “proper Bolling”—by which Emily means a southern gentleman.⁴⁶ Kate tells Binx that he is “like [herself], but worse. Much worse.”⁴⁷ At that moment in which Binx sees Kate looking for him, Kate helps Binx in a way that he cannot help himself. Kate’s appearance at the end is crucial. The sight of her looking for him prevents Binx from sinking into distraction. Courage does not prevent Binx from sinking into despair, but Kate does. He needs someone else with whom to share his search, because he is not a self-sufficient being. Binx is a part, though not a part in a movie or cosmic drama. Being a part is better than playing a part. In Emily’s cosmic drama, individuals are self-sufficient, but stuck in roles not of their choosing. Binx realizes as he sees Kate looking for him that she is another being like himself and so is capable of joining him being in and reflecting on the world. Binx’s discovery of the possibility of a joint search is not a solution or resolution, but a gladdening discovery.

Through Binx, Percy shows us that the self’s dependency draws us to others is a happier circumstance than pretending that the self is self-sufficient. The Lovells believe they can find happiness by playing the role, or part, of a consumer. The Lovells play a

⁴⁴ Newkirk, 192 and 193.

⁴⁵ Mary Grabar, “Percy’s Despairing Female in the ‘Unmoved Mover’” *Renascence* 54 (2002): 126.

⁴⁶ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 43.

⁴⁷ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 43.

part, but Binx realizes that he is a part in need of another. Being a part is better than playing a part. The pursuer of happiness denies his partiality and so experiences much uneasiness and unhappiness as a result. Percy's search presents the possibility of some relief and respite from unhappiness and loneliness when realize our need for others. Rather than being a step down from self-sufficiency, being a part and needing others becomes the occasion for greater happiness. Binx experiences gladness in finding in Kate another fellow wayfarer with whom he can share his life. Binx and Kate's marriage represents not the resolution or end of the search, but, instead, the way in Binx and Kate will continue searching together.

Of all the novels I examine, only *The Moviegoer* has a conventionally happy ending in which the protagonist gets the girl and marries her. Binx's conventional happy ending is amusing given his observation that "movies are onto the search, but they screw [endings] up."⁴⁸ Binx complains that movies begin appropriately with the main character finding himself in strange circumstances, but he inevitably loses his sense of strangeness, finds a girl, and settles down with her. Binx complains that despite the promising original strangeness, the main character becomes "so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead."⁴⁹ *The Moviegoer* follows the typical Hollywood romance formula, but Percy does not end *The Moviegoer* promptly after Binx and Kate happily unite. Percy gives us further scenes that reveals the death of Binx's brother, Binx assuming responsibility for helping with his siblings, and Binx helping Kate. In this way, Percy creatively avoids a proper ending in which all the parts are tidily explained and the story comes to a full stop. The search is not complete within the dust jacket of the novel.

⁴⁸ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 13.

⁴⁹ Percy, *Moviegoer*, 13.

Marriage represents not the resolution and end of the search, but, instead, as the way in Binx and Kate will continue searching together.

Despite Percy's criticisms of the United States and the pursuit of happiness, he shows that the right kind of search is possible within the United States. Unlike Emily's stoicism, the United States does not preclude the possibility of a search. The United States is open to philosophic investigation in a way stoicism is not. The Declaration may, so to speak, cast individuals adrift from traditional moorings, but individuals are already adrift. Using one of Percy's favorite metaphors, individuals are like castaways who find themselves somewhere and do not know what to do and have only each other to help them along the way. The individual finds himself—a being with consciousness—to be a strange being. As Percy notes in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, at the heart of a human community is a paradox, because its "members are both alone yet not alone" and the individual through trying to understand himself as this unique being who is "stuck with the consciousness of himself as a self" realizes that "there are others who, however tentatively, have undertaken the same quest."⁵⁰ *The Moviegoer* ends with good news. The relief from uneasiness we can know begins by realizing that there are fellow wayfarers and that even within a nation largely given over to everydayness the search is possible.

Yet, *The Moviegoer* is not a Pollyanna story. *The Moviegoer* alludes to the broader political danger of selves sunk in everydayness pose to human life and happiness. Percy hints at the despairing self's destructive potential when Binx waits for Kate to appear on the playground and begins to doubt that she will come. Binx's thoughts turn to

⁵⁰ Percy, *Signposts*, 151.

the Cold War, and he observes that “what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall.”⁵¹ Binx’s self-destructive thoughts never come to fruition, because Kate’s appearance averts Binx’s turn from the worst. Consequently, *The Moviegoer*’s happy ending is possible because the individual enjoys much freedom to order his life aside from the political body. However, in *Lost in the Cosmos* and also *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy considers how political orders may try to achieve happiness through self-destruction.

Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book

In *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, Percy playfully mocks the American desire for self-reliant, step-by-step techniques for well-being. Armed with self-help manuals, Americans believe they do not need anyone else to help them, because they can help themselves. However, Percy’s mockery is limited. First, the popularity of self-help books points to a broadly-felt desire for self-knowledge and guidance that indicates some level of self-awareness that the self needs help. This differs somewhat from *The Moviegoer*. The nearly impenetrable everydayness that *The Moviegoer* suggests that everydayness so effectively obscures the inner despair of the soul of most Americans that little hope persists of ever piercing through the dark cloud of everydayness. *Lost in the Cosmos* presents a more complex view of the individual. Americans are searchers who look for help, if not always in the right places. Secondly, even as the self-help book seems to promise self-sufficiency, the self-help book betrays

⁵¹ Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 228. See also Virginia Nickles Osborne’s “‘The Most Ordinary Life Imaginable’: Cold War Culture in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 41 (2009): 106-125. Osborne’s reading is remarkably free from existential analysis and focuses exclusively on *The Moviegoer* as a landmark southern novel that shifts from the usual, Faulkner subject matter to cold war concerns. Although Osborne considers Binx’s despondence as the result of living under the threat of atomic war, Osborne highlights better than any other scholar how much the threat of nuclear war appears in the story.

its purpose. Self-help manuals pretend to dispose of the need of an in-person teacher, but they cannot dispose of the writer of the self-help book. Percy exploits this inconsistency. By “inviting the reader into the writing as joint enterprise,” Crowley observes that Percy and reader “engage actively in a mutual, communal creative process.”⁵² Percy uses the self-help format to further friendly and joint purposes rather than encourage self-reliance and independence. Reading *Lost in the Cosmos* gives the reader a taste of the collaborative relation possible between two individuals searching together. This collaborative relationship prepares the reader to think about the political consequences of preferring false self-sufficiency and pursuing after phantom happiness and learning to take joy in needing others to share one’s life and for being the occasion of happiness in others.

Technically, *Lost in the Cosmos* is not a novel. Yet, it is an appropriate subject for my project inasmuch as its self-help format mimics psychological self-help books designed to guide individuals to happiness and uses fictional sketches to illuminate. A twenty question quiz makes up the bulk of *Lost in the Cosmos*; interrupted once by an “intermezzo” on “A Semiotic Primer of the Self.”⁵³ The so-called quiz questions are really elaborate thought experiments coupled sometimes with fictional sketches to present to reader the different ways in which the individual can situate the self in the cosmos.⁵⁴ The first 18 questions culminate in the realization that these modes of living in the world

⁵² Crowley, “Walker Percy: The Continuity of the Complex Fate,” 270.

⁵³ Percy, *Lost*, 83 and 85.

⁵⁴ For example, the first question presents the amnesic self. Percy observes that many films, books, and soap operas inevitably have a character that develops amnesia. This presents an opportunity for the character to start over in a new place, new friends, and new lover, but he eventually starts uncovering clues about his former life. Percy cites Hitchcock's *Spellbound* as the prime example of the amnesic self in which amnesic Gregory Peck assumes a new life, and with the help of Ingrid Bergman, uncovers his past life.

eventually become worn out and exhausted, and the self turns to violence and war in hopes of self-destruction. Percy describes the final two questions as alternative space odysseys in which World War III devastates Earth. In the second space odyssey, Captain Schuyler is presented with two options, go to Europa or stay on Earth, for humanity's survival and happiness. Percy does not reveal the Captain's choice, but instead shows both alternative futures. The scientific utopia on Europa turns out to be a disappointment—no happiness, but plenty of well-being—though species' survival is assured. Staying on Earth looks like the riskier choice with respect for survival, but turns out to be the only option that allows for happiness.

Lost in the Cosmos's peculiar format struck a wrong note with some commentators. In her review, Francine Du Plessix Gray found the book "exasperating" and a "pop-Socratic" failure to make the reader aware of Percy's despair caused by vapid American life.⁵⁵ Similarly, another reviewer called the twenty question quiz a "kind of parody of the Socratic method."⁵⁶ Thomas Disch found Percy's direct address to the reader "an oppressive experience" and disliked the "chummy multiple-choice questionnaires."⁵⁷ Another commentator on *Lost in the Cosmos* faults the book for its "lack of reflective seriousness."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Francine Du Plessix Gray, "A Pop-Socratic Survey of Despair," *Critical Essays on Walker Percy*, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Sue Mitchell Crowley (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1989), 67.

⁵⁶ Anatole Broyard, "Books of the Times: Trying to Help the Self" *The New York Times*, section 1, page 12, June 11, 1983, Late City Final Edition.

⁵⁷ Thomas Disch, "Walker Percy's Summa Semiotica," *The Washington Post* June 19, 1983, Final Edition, section, Book World, 5.

⁵⁸ Kieran Quinlan, *Walker Percy: the Last Catholic Novelist* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996) 178.

Lost in the Cosmos has its fans, but its peculiar character makes scholarly treatments challenging and infrequent.⁵⁹ The few scholars that address the book prove that fruitful treatments may be gained from its analysis. As a refashioning of “Rip Van Winkle, now in space-age dress,” J. Donald Crowley says *Lost in the Cosmos* as one of Percy’s “most blatantly American.”⁶⁰ Just as Rip Van Winkle returns from his long slumber and retells his story, Percy designs two space odysseys to help us readers return to ourselves, so to speak, and “know better...how to write and live our stories of ourselves more fully.”⁶¹ Although Crowley’s essay is not specifically or even primarily concerned with *Lost in the Cosmos*, he treats the work as a whole and as a fictional work alongside Percy’s other novels. Arguing that there is method in the book’s apparent mad design, Michael A. Mikolajczak claims that *Lost in the Cosmos* is not a disorganized montage, but “is carefully structured and highly controlled.”⁶² Mikolajczak divides the novel into three thematic parts in which the first addresses the peculiarity of human

⁵⁹ Most often scholars use parts of the book, particularly the semiotic “intermezzo,” in the course of other projects on Percy’s work to clarify his theory of language. For example, John Edward Hardy uses the semiotic “intermezzo” and the space odysseys to explain Percy’s theory of language in the introduction to his book *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 13-19. John F. Desmond uses the semiotic “intermezzo” to establish a “conceptual framework” in “Resurrecting the Body: Walker Percy and the Sensuous-Erotic Spirit” *Renascence* 58 (Spring 2006): 195. In a discussion of Percy’s theory of re-entry, suicide, and *The Second Coming*, Robert W. Rudnicki borrows the list of selves presented in the twenty question quiz in *Percyscapes: The Fugue State in Twentieth-Century Southern Fiction* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 44-49.

⁶⁰ The spaceship, whose captain is of Dutch descent, is, like Rip Van Winkle, absentee for 18 years and returns to discover it dramatically changed. Despite near obliteration of the Earth, the crew of the spaceship remain themselves just like how Rip Van Winkle is not the least changed, but still enjoys idling. J. Donald Crowley, “Walker Percy: The Continuity of the Complex Fate,” in *Critical Essays on Walker Percy*, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Sue Mitchell Crowley (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall & Co., 1989), 270.

⁶¹ Crowley, “Walker Percy: The Continuity of the Complex Fate,” 270.

⁶² Michael A. Mikolajczak, “‘A Home That is Hope’: Lost Cove, Tennessee,” *Renascence* 50 (1998) 299. In fact, Mikolajczak notes that Percy repeats this same thematic order in the subtitle to Percy’s book of essays *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One has to Do With the Other*.

beings and the predicament they find themselves in, the second the triadic character of human language, and in the third the relationship between the human beings and language. Mikolajczak makes a good case that *Lost in the Cosmos* is an ordered and organized whole. However, his focus on language overlooks how Percy engages in political questions of the ends and purposes of political communities. Notwithstanding this criticism, Mikolajczak's analysis has been most helpful. Recognizing the political aspect of *Lost in the Cosmos*, Peter Augustine Lawler argues that *Lost* may be treated as Percy's Christian and political case against Carl Sagan's scientific reductionism.⁶³ Following Lawler's political analysis of the text, I will also focus on the space odysseys, and, particularly, the second space odyssey in which Percy depicts Captain Schuyler compelled to decide the fate of the human race by either going to Europa to found a new beginning for humanity or staying on Earth at Lost Cove, Tennessee. After a summary, I will argue that the colony on Europa falls short of expectations and delivers well-being not happiness, and that despite Percy's critique of the Declaration, he is pro-happiness and that Lost Cove is the choice for happiness. Finally, I will discuss why Percy chooses a stoic, the Captain, to make this decision, and consider why might the Captain choose Lost Cove.

Lost in the Cosmos begins with the premise that we knowers of the natural world know very little about ourselves. Percy claims no originality on this point and prefaces the book with quote by Nietzsche that "[w]e are unknown, we knowers, to ourselves...as

⁶³ According to Peter Lawler, both Percy and Sagan recognize that human beings are "naturally wanderers and wonderers," but disagree on the reason (52). Sagan believes we wander like our original hunter-gathers for the sake of survival, but Percy believes we wander because we wonder about ourselves. Lawler argues that Percy exposes Sagan's scientism to be destructive of the wondering that science needs. See the chapter "Aliens Are Us?" in Peter Augustine Lawler's *Aliens in America: The Strange Truth about Our Souls* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), 51-74.

far as ourselves are concerned we are not knowers.”⁶⁴ According to Percy, we can readily identify Jupiter from scores of other tiny pinpricks of light in the night sky, but cannot identify ourselves. As the world becomes more known and grasped by our principles and techniques, these reductionist principles and techniques are the prime suspects that prevent us from knowing ourselves. We remove ourselves from the world we seek to understand, and so commit the error Binx identifies as the vertical search.

Percy attributes this error to the philosophical underpinnings of the Declaration. The standard American self is a right bearing being who seeks fulfillment and happiness through work, society, leisure activities, and scientific and artistic pursuits and who should in a “free and affluent society” succeed in finding fulfillment: “Happiness can be pursued and to a degree caught.”⁶⁵ According to Percy, the Declaration is primarily a Lockean document, and Locke follows Descartes with respect to the abstract, autonomous self that emerges from Descartes’s separation of the soul (*res cogitans*) from the body (*res extensa*).⁶⁶ Freed from traditional and religious moorings, the self becomes lost and “dislocated.”⁶⁷ The individual does not find happiness as promised by the release from traditional and religious understandings of the self. The American identity fails; it morphs into the “diverted self” in which “the pursuit of happiness becomes the pursuit of

⁶⁴ Percy, *Lost*, vii.

⁶⁵ Percy, *Lost*, 12.

⁶⁶ Percy’s critique of the Cartesian dualism and ontology has been explored by scholars. See John F. Desmond, “Walker Percy and Suicide,” *Modern Age* (2005): 58-63, Jon Young “Walker Percy on the Cartesian Ideal of Knowing,” *Renascence* 42 (1990): 123-40), and Mathew Sitman and Brian Smith’s “The Rift in the Modern Mind: Tocqueville and Percy on the Rise of the Cartesian Self,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 36 (2007): 15-22.

⁶⁷ Percy, *Lost*, 12.

["endless"] diversion."⁶⁸ The United States' failure is due to its success at creating a "free and affluent society" in which the individual has abundant ways of being a consumer of goods in the vain attempt to fulfill the (vacuous) self. Instead of being fulfilled, "the self...is in fact impoverished and deprived, like Lazarus at the feast, having suffered a radical deprivation and loss of sovereignty."⁶⁹ The leftover self becomes more like a ghost or specter. As spectator of the world, the lost understands it perfectly, but is maddeningly unable to participate within it. The specter haunts the world instead of living within it and increasingly finds its sad state intolerable. Disappointed and unable to make itself be happy, the lost self seeks relief from the burden of being a self through modes of transcendence, immanence, and denial that lead to self-destruction. The next 18 questions present different roles through which the lost self manages his consciousness—how do ghosts make themselves known? Percy concludes that eventually these roles become exhausted and the self, like a poltergeist, turns to violence and destruction. This means that the United States puts individuals in a precarious position. In the space odysseys, Percy considers what help we may have.

The space odysseys constitute the final two questions of the book and begin with the same scenario. On the verge of self-destructive warfare, civilization needs help to prevent the destruction of the human race. Earth receives a signal that appears to be sent from alien life and a manned space ship is sent to find and establish communication with the aliens. In the first space odyssey, the space ship find aliens, but the aliens refuse to help the humans. The aliens do not help because they have no self-interest to help and only risk disordering themselves by interacting with the spaceship. In the second space

⁶⁸ Percy, *Lost*, 12.

⁶⁹ Percy, *Lost*, 74.

odyssey, considering the likelihood of devastating warfare on Earth, NASA plans for the spaceship to carry on the human race in event of the end of civilization. While the space mission travels just 18 years, nearly 400 years pass on earth and so a plan for reproduction must be adopted. NASA settles on ‘programmed serial monogamy’—a crew of one man and three women.⁷⁰ The space ship does not find aliens, and so returns to war devastated Earth. By eliminating the possibility of help from alien life in the second space odyssey, the survivors must look to each other and deliberate about how best to live. Two options are set forth for the captain of the space crew—one that virtually ensures the continuation of the species and secures its well-being and the second that proves riskier from the perspective of species survival and security, but better for fulfilling the human desire for happiness. Percy does not reveal the captain’s decision, but instead shows what would happen in either case.

Captain Marcus Aurelius Schuyler is an Air Force Academy pilot who studied astronomy at M.I.T. and has a background in history who NASA selects to pilot a space ship to investigate a possible signal from aliens. The slender hope is that aliens may be able to help humanity from its self-destructive warfare. Captain Schuyler takes after his stoic namesake with respect to his “dark view of the human condition” and his penchant to “[ake] his pleasure in acting well even though he knew it probably would not avail and that things would end badly.”⁷¹ With his ancient perspective, Captain Schuyler is aptly suited to this mission as an individual ready to do what is necessary under bleak circumstances. The remaining three women crew members are Tiffany, an astrophysicist-psychotherapist, Kimberly, a linguist-semioticist, and Jane, the ship’s

⁷⁰ Percy, *Lost*, 227.

⁷¹ Percy, *Lost*, 229.

doctor. Jane is also a religious minority affirmative action choice, as required by recent Supreme Court rulings. As a Methodist, Jane represents the small Christian minority lingering in America. On the outward journey, she refuses to have sex with Captain Schuyler until he, in his capacity as captain of the ship, marries them. Twelve children are born to the space travelers.

Finding no aliens, the spaceship returns to Earth. Upon arriving in the Utah desert, they find Earth devastated by war, but with a few survivors. Aristarchus Jones, a loner astronomer who calculated when and where the spaceship would return, and Abbot Leibowitz, the abbot of a Benedictine monastery who leads a small community of monks and misbegotten children, greet the spaceship. Radiation has contributed to birth-defects and caused increasing sterility. The arrival of the spaceship with the crew and their healthy children present a chance that the human race might yet survive and thrive. Returning from space, the space travelers are like “aliens.” With their spaceship and healthy and fertile children, they represent the only hope for humanity’s survival. It is an undetermined hope. It is not clear what course of action would be best for humanity, because it is not settled what ends are best for human life.

As the pilot of the spaceship, it is up to the stoical Captain Schuyler to decide the future of the human race. Aristarchus Jones and the Abbot Liebowitz present the captain with two alternatives: either go to Europa, a habitable moon of Jupiter, or take their chances on Earth in Lost Cove, Tennessee. Aristarchus Jones argues that the human race cannot survive on Earth—too much radiation and sterility. Colonizing Europa presents a bright opportunity to make a new start. Civilization can be based on “reason and

science” like ancient Ionia free from the mistakes of Plato and religion.⁷² On the other hand, Abbot Liebowitz says that he does not know whether human life is finished on Earth and gives a Christian account of humans as fallen beings, redeemed through the birth, passion, and resurrection of Christ, and waiting for the promised return of Christ. Abbot Liebowitz believes he may be the only person alive who can consecrate priests and so says that he will “stay here in case the human race survives and need priests.”⁷³ Walker Percy does not show us which Schuyler chooses, but shows us the consequences of each choice.

If Captain Schuyler decides in favor of Aristarchus, he leaves nuclear war ravaged Earth for a moon of Jupiter, Europa, to realize Aristarchus’s utopian society. Named in honor of the original birthplace of science, New Ionia is

operated on the principles of Skinner’s Walden II modified by Jungian self-analysis, with suitable rewards for friendly social behavior and punishment, even exile, for aggression, jealous, hostile, solitary, mystical, or other anti-social behavior.⁷⁴

Instead of government, the New Ionians have daily group sessions “of self-criticism and honest appraisal of others” where they practice a new golden rule of “honesty, absolute honesty.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, New Ionia is free from pain and deformity (the deformed children were left behind on Earth). There is no political and ethnic conflict, and sex is free from inhibitions. Much, however, of their contentment and group cooperation is drug induced. The air is much thinner on Europa and to compensate the New Ionians are

⁷² Percy, *Lost*, 246.

⁷³ Percy, *Lost*, 249.

⁷⁴ Percy, *Lost*, 256.

⁷⁵ Percy, *Lost*, 257.

given daily rations of cocaine. To encourage proper social behavior, they are daily expected to participate in *dewalis* sessions where they smoke dried lichen that “induce[s] a mild euphoria.”⁷⁶ After many years, New Ionia becomes a “peaceful agricultural-fishing society.”⁷⁷

In New Ionia, the Captain sits outside his cave reading *Henry IV* and replays an old recording of Mozart’s fourteenth string quartet. Captain Schuyler is ironic toward the utopian society and considers the group sessions akin to AA meetings. Jane and he are no longer married and Jane sulks in her cave by herself; she knows New Ionia does not tolerate sulking in the open. Two extraordinarily beautiful young women, Candace and Rima, attend to him. While Rima massages the Captain’s neck, Candace invites him to her cave to have sex. After the Captain perfunctorily agrees, Rima tightens her grip on him in intimidation. Taking the hint, the Captain requests that Rima join them, and they retreat his cave, but he is little moved by the prospect of sex.

If Captain Schuyler decides in favor of Abbot Liebowitz, he stays on post-apocalyptic Earth and goes to Lost Cove, Tennessee. The community grows traditional local crops like collards; they trap rabbits, enjoy tobacco, and drink whiskey. Radiation levels persist and sperm count varies. Even so, Lost Cove increases in numbers both from pregnancies and from other survivors. These survivors include “Southerners, white and Anglo-Saxon, and blacks, with a sprinkling of Hispanics, Jews, and Northern ethnics.”⁷⁸ Both the physically sound and deformed children flourish. Unlike in New Ionia, the Lost Cove community has room for many types of individuals. To be sure,

⁷⁶ Percy, *Lost*, 256.

⁷⁷ Percy, *Lost*, 256.

⁷⁸ Percy, *Lost*, 258.

Lost Cove does not suit everyone. Some of the hippies voluntarily decide to leave and “move on” from Lost Cove.⁷⁹ Presumably, they form or join a community elsewhere.

In addition to ethnic and racial groups, many social and religious groups flourish in Lost Cove. On this Sunday that Percy shows us, some are at Mass, others are at protestant services, and others, the non-believers, are “gathered companionably.”⁸⁰ The Captain enjoys sitting on a hillside just above the cave where he is joined by other “unbelievers—non-church-goers and dissidents of one sort and another.”⁸¹ It is an eclectic crowd of mountain men, former Atlanta businessmen, feminists, hippies and vagabonds. The Sunday morning hillside non-believers debate about agricultural and political subjects such as corn co-ops and what ought Lost Cove do about the violent (and snake handling) community in old Carolinas. The Captain serves as the community’s leader and negotiates with an emissary from the violent Carolina community that wishes to reignite old ethnic and religious conflicts. Percy notes that the emissary and the Captain “shake their hands in friendship,” take a drink together, and, having honored diplomatic courtesies, they “hunker down” to discuss politics.⁸² The emissary offers a political alliance to the Captain. He suggests that the whites, protestants, and Americans unite against everyone else—blacks, Jews, Catholics, and foreigners. The Captain laughs and realizes “here we go again.”⁸³ Despite being the survivors of the near annihilation of

⁷⁹ Percy, *Lost*, 261.

⁸⁰ Percy, *Lost*, 259.

⁸¹ Percy, *Lost*, 259.

⁸² Percy, *Lost*, 260.

⁸³ Percy, *Lost*, 261.

the human race, nothing has changed—that is, human beings still are capable of violence, sectarianism, racism, divisiveness, and self-destruction.

From the perspective of survival, human race will be best served by going to Europa. Going to Lost Cove is the biologically riskier choice. Radiation still threatens the survivors, sperm count varies, and other violent communities threaten Lost Cove. In New Ionia, there is no radiation to worry about and fertility rises and Captain Schuyler could be confident that he saved the human species from extinction. Aristarchus Jones, however, promises more than survival. He promises that New Ionia will be a happy new beginning for human civilization. Free from the errors of the past and from biological defects, they build New Ionia on the scientific insights into human sociability and well-being. To a great extent, New Ionia succeeds. As a fishing community, the New Ionians enjoy much leisure apparently free from back-breaking labor of procuring food and securing settlements. No other peoples on Europa exist to threaten them and so there is no need to defend New Ionia. In lieu of such basic concerns, New Ionia focuses on the group's well-being.⁸⁴ Life in New Ionia appears comfortable, secure, leisurely, and peaceful.

Despite its appearance, New Ionia falls short of the utopian promise. To be clear, New Ionia is not an Orwellian political dystopia, but a portrayal of a scientific, non-political attempt to construct a society conducive to human well-being. New Ionia succeeds insofar as well-being is concerned, but it lacks the richer, robust feelings associated with happiness. Life is so well-managed in New Ionia that there is too little to do. Captain Schuyler is like a man in exile with only his books and music to relieve

⁸⁴ Aristarchus Jones says that they will focus on “learning to know ourselves, for only by knowing our interior gods and demons can we exorcise them” (256).

somewhat his old longings for action and decision. One commentator observes that Captain Schuyler reads *Henry IV*, Shakespeare's play about leadership, but New Ionia needs no leadership.⁸⁵ Since individuals have little need of each other, they do not enjoy the hearty relationships that contribute to happiness. Captain Schuyler does not talk, discuss, debate, or bicker with the inhabitants in New Ionia. He has sex with the younger New Ionians—New Ionia is not unpleasant—but sex is a poor surrogate for the more “complex courtship” he enjoyed with the three women crew members on the outward journey to find alien life.⁸⁶ New Ionia's post-political society does not need a man of action and so the Captain retreats to the stoic's inner sanctuary. In this respect, Captain Schuyler bears the lingering aches for action and complex human relationships better than Jane, who sulks by herself in her cave. Unhappiness retreats within the narrow bounds of the individual private life.

In New Ionia, public displays of unhappiness are not permitted. Jane sulks in her cave, because she knows she would not be allowed to sulk in public. In this respect, Percy shows that Aristarchus Jones's plan to do without political life and the errors of the past by imposing honesty—transparency—as the reigning virtue and key to happiness does not succeed. In fact, these so-called demands for honesty aim to suppress voices that question and disagree with the reigning ideology. In addition, group sessions aim to reduce difference among individuals, or “otherness,” so as to prevent discord. New Ionia succeeds in keeping the peace, but New Ionia's honesty policy prevents individuals from sharing their lives with others through private relationships. No spousal pairs, no families, no friends, no political parties, clubs, or other private associations smaller than

⁸⁵ Mikolajczak, 313.

⁸⁶ Percy, *Lost*, 235. The Captain had fun “playing the unflappable captain” and “doing his job, and lounging at his ease” in such a way to please the women, which in turn pleased him (228 and 235).

New Ionia itself exist. Even sexual unions include more than two persons. The Captain does not dare refuse Rima's hint to be included with Candace and himself. Smaller private associations are treated with suspicion, because individuals may keep secrets with each other. Group sessions relentlessly aim to bring to light the internal feelings of its members. Those individuals who display behavior or sentiments antithetical to New Ionia's founding principle can be exiled. It is unclear who or by what decision making body or process dissenters are punished, but exile from New Ionia is surely the equivalent of a death sentence. No other communities exist on Europa to harbor dissenters, and there is little chance of any others coming into being.

Upon arriving in Europa, Aristarchus Jones fittingly compares their arrival to the arrival of the Pilgrims to the New World and how they must have felt: "we left the old world and the old beliefs behind."⁸⁷ Aristarchus Jones recognizes that New Ionia's closest historical predecessor is the arrival of the Puritans in the New World. Percy, like Nathaniel Hawthorne, recognizes that the Puritans did not succeed in leaving behind the past. Hawthorne, generalizing from our Puritan founders, observes in *The Scarlet Letter* that despite "whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project," founders of utopias inevitably must construct cemeteries and prisons.⁸⁸ New Ionia punishes and exiles those whose ideas are antithetical to the group's ideals. Rima's subtle physical pressure on the Captain's shoulders indicates that jealousy and aggression have not disappeared in New Ionia despite suppression by drugs and regular therapeutic meetings. New Ionia has only freed itself of the old political, traditional, and institutional ways and expressions of internal feeling and desires, not eradicated them completely.

⁸⁷ Percy, *Lost*, 256.

⁸⁸ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 42.

As one commentator argues, the choice between Aristarchus and the Abbot is not, as one might be tempted to think, a choice between science and faith.⁸⁹ Instead, both alternatives require faith. Aristarchus believes that they *now* possess both the experience and the right knowledge to construct society afresh with an aim for happiness. They can leave behind the mistakes of the past and secure a bright new future. Happiness is within reach. Abbot Liebowitz believes that humans are God's creatures, who have through sin fallen, but are redeemable through the Son of God; moreover, the Church awaits his second coming. Both alternatives require a remarkable degree of faith that Captain Schuyler, who will make the decision, does not have. Like his namesake, Captain Marcus Aurelius Schuyler "took his pleasure in acting well even though he knew it probably would not avail and that things would end badly."⁹⁰ He volunteers for the mission to Barnard's Star, because "he didn't believe" that anything would save the human race from self-destructive warfare.⁹¹

It is unlikely that the Captain is greatly moved by Aristarchus Jones's modern enthusiasm for science's ability to create a perfect society or for the Abbot's concern that the human race needs priests. It is worth considering then, why Percy gives this choice to a stoic and how might the Captain be swayed to make his decision in favor of Lost Cove—the choice for the complex and varied human relationships necessary for happiness. As a stoic, Captain Schuyler possesses admirable qualities for leadership. Captain Schuyler is resolute and confident through bleak circumstances. He is leader and capable of making political decisions for the sake of those in his care. Percy allows the

⁸⁹ See Mikolajczk, 312.

⁹⁰ Percy, *Lost*, 229.

⁹¹ Percy, *Lost*, 229.

stoic virtues to shine, because the Captain is not a Southern stoic and so does not share with Emily a longing for the South's aristocratic past. Instead, Captain Schuyler is a descendent of the Dutch who settled in New York. Unlike Percy's usual heroes who are lapsed Catholics, Captain Schuyler is a "Post-Protestant"—post-Puritan—hero.⁹² The Captain arrives at his wintry outlook to cope with the disappointment of the New World. He is a post-modern stoic. To the Puritans, the New World seemed like an opportunity for a fresh start under divine favor, free from the aristocratic errors of the past, but they did not wholly succeed in leaving the Old World behind. In this respect, Captain Schuyler resembles many Americans who, without new frontiers to explore, have lost faith in American exceptionalism. Like Emily, Captain Schuyler likes leading a lost cause, and he thinks the mission to Barnard's Star is a lost cause. Despite his fondness for lost causes, Percy cheats the Captain out of his lost cause and compels him to put his virtues in service of the future and for the sake of the survivors. Captain Schuyler had enjoyed thinking he lived at the end of an age, but, quite unexpectedly, he finds himself in position of being a founder—the so-called lost cause mission to Barnard's Star may prove to be an unexpected success.

If the Captain follows his preference for lost causes, he will choose New Ionia. Unlike Aristarchus, Captain Schuyler knows that New Ionia will be another failed attempt to escape the past and the self by relocating, just as the Puritans tried in the New World. With resignation, the Captain would accept it as humanity's fate to chase after new beginnings and happiness and end up disappointed. In New Ionia, Captain Schuyler would retreat, with his books and music, and live with thin contentment as he relied on his own internal resources for his happiness with scant regard for anyone else.

⁹² Percy, *Lost*, 231.

If Captain Schuyler chooses the Abbot Liebowitz's plan, he is choosing in favor of being with Jane. The supposed failed mission to Barnard's Star succeeds in an unexpected way and provides the pivotal experience to incline Captain Schuyler to choose Lost Cove. The Captain learns to include himself among the survivors—to make decisions as one of them, not on behalf of them. His original mission was a search for alien life, but instead, Captain Schuyler and Jane find each other on the journey. While on the return journey to Earth, the crew looks forward to their return and eagerly chat about what they will and where they will go when they arrive. Jane asks the Captain if he would prefer to come to Tennessee with her to which he responds that he would rather go with her. Captain Schuyler's preference for Jane indicates a reform in his stoicism away from internal self-sufficiency and toward realizing that he needs other people and is not simply needed by them. The Captain does not have to accept the Abbot's account of man as a fallen being awaiting the second coming of Christ to choose Lost Cove. The space mission with Jane revealed to him the possibilities of sharing his life searching with someone else.

Secondly, as the pilot of the ship, Captain Schuyler enjoys a position of leadership. To choose New Ionia would be to choose against himself, because New Ionia does not need his fortitude, confidence, and protection.⁹³ Decisions in New Ionia affecting the group will be managed according to scientific-behavioral theories that once the appropriate conditions are set in place allow little room for further intervening activity. In New Ionia, the Captain is a relic (perhaps useful only as a fertile male), but in Lost Cove, he has much to do for the community's political life. Abbot Liebowitz's plan

⁹³ The Captain's last name, Schuyler, in Dutch means "protector" or "scholar."

is incomplete or partial, because he makes no mention of the political organization of Lost Cove. Political life is left up to the Captain and the other members of Lost Cove.

Percy presents a practical demonstration in *Lost in the Cosmos* that New Ionia may promise happiness, but, in Lost Cove, there are happier people. Lost Cove is the choice for individuals making their way in life guided by particular human relationships. In this light, New Ionia's utopian promise of happiness looks more like a meager survival of the species than the richness, and even excess, of human ties known in Lost Cove. As Percy shows in Lost Cove, Captain Schuyler leads the community, discusses political matters, and meets with foreign agents. Under the Captain's leadership, Lost Cove is made up ethnically peoples from diverse backgrounds, enjoys religious diversity, and cares for the healthy and misbegotten children alike.

Although he set forth the plan for New Ionia, Aristarchus Jones does not appear in either alternative future. In New Ionia, presumably, he wields the unseen power that directs the community. In Lost Cove, perhaps Jones withdraws from society to resume research, or perhaps he moves on to live elsewhere. Percy treats Aristarchus Jones rather kindly. Jones is a searcher though clueless about his own existence as a searcher. He uncovered the old records about the spaceship scheduled return, and, having faith that it would return, he traveled on horseback to the Utah desert in expectation of the spaceship's arrival. The sense of a higher purpose, however, that justifies Aristarchus Jones's slight regard for the particularity of human life that leads him to recommend leaving behind on Earth the misbegotten children and all the other survivors comes under closer scrutiny in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Everydayness stands out as the enemy to the search in *The Moviegoer*, and Percy portrays Aristarchus as an individual in error, but does not fully show his perspective's harm to society. Aristarchus Jones's confidence

that science can find a solution to human unhappiness comes under more direct criticism in *The Thanatos Syndrome*.

The Thanatos Syndrome

In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy more forcefully illustrates how the scientific approach to pursuing happiness sacrifices our capacity for happiness, our consciousness, in the name of promoting animalistic well-being. Feliciana Parish is threatened by a utopian social engineering conspiracy that tries to recreate society free from the causes of human misery and unhappiness. The problem is not that the scientists fail and produce a dystopia, but rather they succeed to a remarkable degree in alleviating social problems. Their “solution” extracts heavy costs. Members of Feliciana Parish risk losing their self-awareness, humanity, life and liberty. Percy defends unhappiness—not in itself good—but as part of the predicament of being a conscious self and so as a clue to self-understanding that promises a greater and more fulfilling happiness. Unhappiness can direct us to a greater good of being in community with others that makes unhappiness seem less terrible and provides real relief from the restless pursuit of happiness.

Set in the not too far off future, *The Thanatos Syndrome* begins as a mystery.⁹⁴ Not quite a murder mystery or a medical mystery, but a psychological mystery. Dr. Tom More, a psychiatrist, “stumbled onto something” amiss with his patients.⁹⁵ He sees

⁹⁴ *The Thanatos Syndrome* is a sequel to *Love in the Ruins*, in which More invented a soul-diagnostic machine that promised to cure the United States of everydayness. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, More claims that he does not ‘have to plumb the depths of “modern man”’ as he tried to do in *Love in the Ruins* (Walker Percy, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (New York, Picador: 1987), 67). Now his “scale is smaller,” and he lives a “small life” that has given him “leave to notice small things” (67). This new capacity to notice and connect small things, clues as Binx would call them, will help More succeed on a smaller scale. Consequently, More has already learned Binx’s lesson of the search as fellow wayfarers. He knows that unhappiness is a part of being a self, but we are happily (fortunately) situated to search with others by talking and listening.

⁹⁵ Percy, *Thanatos*, 4.

clues and slight differences that point toward a peculiar sickness, or loss of self among the inhabitants. His former patients do not exhibit their "old terrors" but appear to be cured of them.⁹⁶ Instead of anxiety and discontent, they display "a mild vacancy, a species of unfocused animal good spirits."⁹⁷ His patients, while freed of their old fears, can barely communicate, and though they appear contented, they sometimes exhibit remarkable brutality and odd sexual behavior. More knows that unhappiness is a part of being a self, but we are happily situated to search with others by talking and listening. With the help of an eclectic group, More puts together the clues to uncovering who and what is behind the community's loss of self.

The aptly named Feliciana Parish is threatened by a utopian social engineering conspiracy that tries to recreate society free from the causes of human misery and unhappiness. The problem is not that the scientists fail and produce a dystopia, but rather they succeed to a remarkable degree to alleviate social problems. Their "solution" extracts heavy costs. Members of the Feliciana Parish risk losing their self-awareness, humanity, life and liberty. Percy defends unhappiness—not in itself good—but as part of the individual and so as a clue to self-understanding. Unhappiness can direct us to a greater good of being in community with others that makes unhappiness seem less terrible and provides real relief from the restless pursuit of happiness.

More discovers that Bob Comeaux and John Van Dorn have been adding heavy sodium to the water supply as part of a project (called Blue Boy) to decrease crime and

⁹⁶ Percy, *Thanatos*, 21.

⁹⁷ Percy, *Thanatos*, 21.

misery and increase well-being and happiness.⁹⁸ The Blue Boy project enjoys significant and remarkable success. It reduces many social evils such as crime, unemployment, suicide, violence, domestic abuse, teenage pregnancies, the spread of AIDS, drug use, depression, anxiety, and suicide. Moreover, it improves IQ scores. Although it decreases verbal and communication skills, heavy sodium improves mental recall and computations. For example, individuals cannot link together words and sentences to tell a story, but they can recall information and make calculations much like a savant.

Blue Boy is an unauthorized project and Comeaux and Van Dorn know that releasing heavy sodium without consent is a dubious maneuver. Yet, Comeaux and Van Dorn reasonably expect that when they reveal the positive statistics to the public, their project will be embraced by the current presidential administration. For the time being, though, they must wait to make public the success of their project until after the

⁹⁸ Although Comeaux and Van Dorn work together, they have appreciably different visions for society. Comeaux works at a qualitarian center where, due to the recent Supreme Court rulings, unwanted children and the elderly are euthanized in the name of preserving quality and dignity of life. (In addition to the futuristic political landscape, federal regulation requires the quarantine of AIDS patients and children born with AIDS.) Comeaux reasons that evolution gave human being unnecessarily large brains that led to the superego's excessive ability to inhibit ego. Release the ego from the superego's hold over it and people are happier, less prone to the cares and anxieties that lead to most social problems. Evolution's mistake can be corrected through the right therapeutic drugs. Not a southern himself, Comeaux adopts the image of the southern gentleman and tries to reconstruct Feliciano as "the best of the Southern Way of Life" (197). Bob Comeaux is, in fact, not from the South at all, but from Long Island and changed his last name from the Italian "Como." Comeaux's co-conspirator, Van Dorn, is the project manager of the coolant division at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and the director of Belle Ame Academy. In his capacity at the NRC, Van Dorn supplies Comeaux with the waste heavy sodium that he puts in the water supply. Van Dorn thinks Comeaux has shortsighted goals for society and regards Blue Boy as just the first phase in the restoration of society and the promotion of excellence. Van Dorn has contempt for Comeaux as a "technologist" and argues that "[y]ou don't treat human ills by creaming the human cortex" (217). Van Dorn recognizes that human beings have to remain human "enough to achieve the ultimate goals of being human" (219). While Comeaux thinks nature, or evolution gave us too big of brains to be happy, Van Dorn blames society for inhibiting the sexual energy that motivates the greatest achievements of artists and scientists. Proper education—intellectual, physical and sexual—can release those energies. At Belle Ame Academy, which is "founded on Greek ideals of virtue," Van Dorn employs "the tough old European Gymnasium-Hochschule treatment" (214 and 219). According to him, this rigorous method releases the repressed sexual energy necessary for "sexual geniuses" like Mozart and Einstein to achieve excellence in the arts and sciences (220). The Belle Ame teachers engage in pedophilic acts with the children as part of their educational training in excellence.

upcoming presidential election in which they expect the incumbent to win reelection easily. Consequently, More poses a threat to the Blue Boy project as an “intervener...the deadliest sort of whistleblower.”⁹⁹ Comeaux and Van Dorn fear that More will expose Blue Boy to the public prior to the election. If More revealed to the public that heavy sodium—used in nuclear reactors—had been added to the water supply without consent, Blue Boy would be jettisoned as political hot potato. Comeaux tries to get More on his side. First, Comeaux appeals to More as a fellow scientist engaged in the same enterprise to improve human life. Secondly, Comeaux reminds More that his research on heavy sodium made the Blue Boy project possible—he is already implicit in the project.¹⁰⁰ Thirdly, Comeaux tries old-fashioned blackmail.¹⁰¹

More dislikes Comeaux and Van Dorn’s methods, but initially seems impressed with their results. He flounders to provide a counterargument to Comeaux’s and Van Dorn’s claim that their methods have superseded his own. More visits Father Smith who sees through the scientists’ claims and links their abstract love of humanity and eugenic policies to the Third Reich. In an impassioned speech, Father Smith explains that “tenderness” is a “disguise” and leads “[t]o the gas chamber.”¹⁰² More finally decides to

⁹⁹ Percy, *Thanatos*, 211.

¹⁰⁰ Comeaux notes that More is “the father of isotope brain pharmacology” (200).

¹⁰¹ Despite his release from prison, More has only a probationary license under the supervision of Bob Comeaux and Max Gottlieb, the members of the ethics committee charged to evaluate More. Comeaux tries to pressure More into joining him in the Quality of Life Division by withholding his recommendation.

¹⁰² Percy, *Thanatos*, 128. After his hospice closed, Father Simon Smith start living in a fire tower much like a St. Simeon Stylite, a Desert Father ascetic who lived on top of a pillar. Father Smith explains the modern attraction to death by telling More about an episode in his youth while visiting relatives in Germany. In his contempt for both the religion of his mother and romanticism of his father, he had been deeply attracted to the readiness, willingness and determination of his cousin, Helmut, to die for his country as an SS officer cadet. Father Smith admits that if he had been a German youth and not an American, he would have joined Helmut. Father Smith’s point is that not just the scientists behind Blue Boy, but everyone is sick with the thanatos syndrome.

thwart Comeaux and Van Dorn's project. Blue Boy is shut down and the people of Feliciana recover their former, troubled selves, but Van Dorn and Comeaux escape punishment.

Tom More may be the protagonist of the story, but many commentators believe the irascible Father Smith is Percy's true spokesman and, as one critic claims, "represents Percy's most uncompromising attack on science."¹⁰³ Representative of this view, Mary Deems Howland observes with disapproval that More consistently fails to counter directly Comeaux's argument that they share the basic goal to improve the human lot. Howland comments that "[w]hen More fails to tell Comeaux that what he is doing is wrong, the reader feels compelled to jump into the void left by Tom and confront Bob's ideas directly."¹⁰⁴ Howland finds Father Smith's uncompromising condemnation and refutation of Comeaux and Van Dorn's project more satisfying. Whereas More is compromised by his breakthrough research on heavy sodium that made Blue Boy possible and his own ambivalent sympathies with Comeaux's goal to reduce human suffering and improve the human lot, Father Smith remains staunchly and adamantly opposed.

¹⁰³ Robert Hughes, "Walker Percy's Comedy and 'The Thanatos Syndrome,'" *Southern Literary Journal* 22 (1989): 6. See John F. Desmond, "Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, and the Holocaust," in *At the Crossroads*, 94-101; Gary M. Ciuba, *Walker Percy: Books of Revelations* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 270-83; Patricia Lewis Poteat, "Pilgrim's Progress; or, a Few Night Thoughts on Tenderness and the Will to Power," in *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher*, ed. Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 208-24; Sue Michell Crowley, "The Thanatos Syndrome: Walker Percy's Tribute to Flannery O'Connor," in Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp, eds, *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 225-37.

¹⁰⁴ Howland, 137. Howland refers to an incident after the qualitarian center is closed in which Comeaux tells More that "What people don't know but what you and I know is that we're bother after the same thing—such as reducing the suffering the world and making criminals behave themselves...*You can't give me one good reason why what I am doing is wrong.* The only difference between us is that you're in good taste and I'm not" (347; italics in original). Before More has a chance to respond, Comeaux leaves.

Howland is right insofar as she observes that More consistently fails to confront Comeaux with a counterargument in the style of Father Smith's impassioned defense of the sacredness of particular life against Comeaux and Van Dorn's devaluation of individual life. Father Smith's argument is attractive because he is so uncompromisingly opposed to the scientists and has no doubt that every human being is a creature of God, created in His image, and whose life is sacred. Father Smith's argument only convinces if one already agrees with him. More never directly confirms Father Smith's metaphysical account of fallen human nature redeemable only through God's grace. Instead, More defends the search with others against Comeaux and Van Dorn who would do away with the unhappiness that leads individuals to seek to understand themselves. More defeats Comeaux and Van Dorn not by theoretical argumentation, but he gives a practical demonstration in which, after foiling their conspiracy and instead of punishing or killing them, he tries to help them.

Percy sets *The Thanatos Syndrome* slightly in the future in which he may suppose fictional, but plausible political circumstances in which groups of individuals deemed of limited social utility are disposed of for the sake of improve the well-being of the whole. Although Blue Boy is unauthorized, Percy shows that given the public policies in already in operation at the start of the novel, the American doctrine of rights does not sufficiently protect individual life and liberty. The pursuit of happiness, instead of being the reason for life and liberty, becomes the justification to deprive individuals of life and liberty. Socially vulnerable groups, such as AIDS patients and AIDS children, children with severe mental and physical impairments, and the elderly, are already marginalized and deprived of life and liberty through ordinary political procedures. As far as the novel shows, the public accepts these laws as legitimate and efficacious. Congress cuts funding

for Medicare, but not for the Qualitarian centers where the euthanasia of impaired and unwanted children and elderly is routine. By federal regulation, AIDS patients and children born with AIDS live under quarantine—a great deprivation of personal liberty. The Supreme Court creates a “Right to Death provision” through a series of rulings that supports euthanasia of children and the elderly, euphemistically referred to as pedeuthanasia and gereuthanasia, respectively.¹⁰⁵

Comeaux and Van Dorn correctly see their project as a continuation of these public policies. The court grounded its decision in favor of euthanatizing unwanted or severely deformed or mentally impaired children on the proper respect for the family, the opinions of experts, and due concern for children who may otherwise lead intolerable lives of abuse or suffering. In consideration of the euthanasia of the elderly, the court balanced how a life with dignity must entail death with dignity. No doubt these are the reasonable considerations the court would balance in their judgment. Percy takes care to add this detail to make the Court’s ruling plausible to the reader and thereby make the danger real.

In this way, Percy points to deficiencies in American public discourse. The doctrine of rights does not sufficiently protect individuals who have been deemed socially undesirable from oppression, because it is incomplete. It relies too heavily on an abstracted concept of the individual as an autonomous self in which autonomy is the essential characteristic of the individual. Giving primacy to preservation of individual autonomy mistakes the autonomous self, a theoretical creation, for the whole person. When public conversations, such as judicial and legislative deliberations, focus on quality of life and dignity to preserve individual autonomy, they obscure the extent to which we

¹⁰⁵ Percy, *Thanatos*, 199.

are needy beings who require non-contractual social relationships to mutually seek self knowledge. Comeaux confidently expects that just as the courts have consistently upheld the addition of fluoride in drinking water—for the mere but tangible benefit of improving the public’s teeth—it will uphold the addition of heavy sodium in the water supply as a true political and social panacea.¹⁰⁶

The main objection More musters against the scientists’ plot is that they are “assaulting the cortex of an individual” without informed consent.¹⁰⁷ More’s argument rests on familiar liberal grounds regarding the principles of consent. By depicting More voicing this argument, Percy shows the weakness of solely liberal foundations to protect individuals from the kind of scientific manipulation conducted by Comeaux. Comeaux belittles the question of informed consent calling it a “philosophical question”; he claims that the “real” question is whether human misery is caused by evolving unnecessarily large brains.¹⁰⁸ Deftly, Comeaux replaces a political question of consent that entails theories about social contract, rights, duties, and personhood in favor of a much simpler empirical, material question. He rejects the stuff of normal political discourse regarding

¹⁰⁶ It appears that Percy paints a harsh portrait of the future of American politics, and depicts our political institutions failing utterly to protect life and liberty. Later in the novel, Percy reveals that the Supreme Court’s ruling was more ambiguous with regard to interpretation and implementation. After More foils the conspiracy, he asks Max Gottlieb to have all infant candidates for ped euthanasia to be sent to the hospice. Max Gottlieb objects that he cannot, because it would violate the Supreme Court case, *Doe v. Dade*, that determined that personhood does not begin until 18 months of age. More counters that the court ruling did not require ped euthanasia. It “only permits it under certain circumstances” (334). It makes a difference whether the ruling is interpreted broadly to require euthanasia or narrowly to permit it conditionally. By More’s narrow interpretation, the Supreme Court’s ruling appears more reasonable and circumspect. It appears that doctors, like Comeaux, interpreted the ruling to support their eugenic purposes whereas it is possible to interpret it narrowly to apply to exceptional cases.

¹⁰⁷ Percy, *Thanatos*, 193.

¹⁰⁸ Percy, *Thanatos*, 194. Part of the human brain and consciousness is, as Comeaux explains, ‘not only an aberration of evolution but is also the scourge and curse of life on this earth, the source of wars, insanities, perversions—in short, those very pathologies which are peculiar to *Homo sapiens*’ (195). In Freudian terms, Comeaux explains that heavy sodium suppresses the superego and bolsters the ego by releasing natural feel good chemicals, endorphins.

right and consent as so much metaphysical nonsense that has overlooked the real or the material problem behind social problems that can be solved by simply chemically suppressing the brain a bit.

Turning the tables on More, Comeaux claims that he protects society from the real assaulters—those usual criminal malefactors like murderers, robbers, and rapists. Blue Boy virtually eliminates those violent social malfeasances. By bypassing the usual political concerns for consent and rights, Comeaux and Van Dorn believe they achieve what the political process could not. Divisive political debates can be transcended by scientific solutions. Case in point, Comeaux cites the rise in youthful pregnancies that entails contentious debates on "contraceptives in schools, abortion, [and] child abuse."¹⁰⁹ By adding a hormone to school cafeteria diet that changes the female reproduction cycle from menstrual to estrus, youthful pregnancies virtually disappear in the test high school. With that simple biological alternation, old for and against abortion arguments are bypassed, the state saves money, families stay together, and so "[f]amily life is improved."¹¹⁰

Such palpable results as Blue Boy's appear to overcome objections based on rights and consent, because heavy sodium achieves the social concord and individual well-being that the doctrine of rights and politics failed to produce. Given the desperate and bleak depiction of rampant crime and unhappiness, the public may embrace Blue Boy for the sake of anything to cure themselves. Not only are our governing institutions unable to uphold individual life and liberty, it seems that the public itself may have lost the will to defend individual life and liberty. The ends of liberalism and even the pursuit

¹⁰⁹ Percy, *Thanatos*, 196.

¹¹⁰ Percy, *Thanatos*, 197.

of happiness can be better accomplished by means other than its own. Blue Boy accomplishes what the political process has failed to do. Social ills are overcome, but lost is the individual freedom to answer the question “how to live” both for oneself and as a participating member of society.

Consequently, Blue Boy’s brilliant statistical success hides how these so-called social improvements come at the expense of the groups traditionally and historically marginalized in American society. The spread of AIDS is reduced primarily because heavy sodium decreases the desire for drugs (fewer needle transmissions) and reduces homosexual tendencies. Comeaux proudly says that voluntarily the Gay and Lesbian Club at LSU disbanded, gay bars closed, and that the sale of homosexual videos dropped. Crime dropped and instead of “young punks” on the streets, they are “of their own accord” learning trades in occupations like plumbing and the service industry.¹¹¹ Comeaux tells More about how beautiful the Baton Rouge projects have become with lush gardens and native artwork. Perhaps the most dramatic presentation of the effects of heavy sodium is the image of the prison inmates in the fields—the men bare-chested and women wearing “colorful kerchiefs”—singing old hymns (“*swing low, sweet chariot*”) and picking cotton.¹¹² Comeaux says that they are content and do not want to leave. Although he claims that he is “just a guy out to improve a little bit the quality of life for all Americans,” he has recreated society according to his likening.¹¹³ Comeaux suppresses homosexuality so as to eliminate AIDS, gains control over women’s

¹¹¹ Percy, *Thanatos*, 198.

¹¹² Percy, *Thanatos*, 266.

¹¹³ Percy, *Thanatos*, 200.

reproduction systems, channels troubled youths to service industry jobs, and converts prisoners (mostly black) into virtual slaves working the fields.

In contrast to the Blue Boy scientists, More's approach to treatment that is less like a cure and more, as one commentator describes it, "a process involving mutuality and reciprocity between physician and patient."¹¹⁴ More seeks to help his patients and also hopes to be helped by them. For example, although More is concerned about Father Smith's mental and physical health, he seeks Father Smith's advice about how to respond to Comeaux's job offer and the heavy sodium in the water. Unlike the scientists, More "understand[s] himself as related to, and dependent upon others."¹¹⁵ More calls this his "best therapy" in which he is "asking for help and helping by asking."¹¹⁶

Tom More brings people together and unites them usually by showing them how they can help each other. More explains that where movies and TV stories "go wrong" is that "[y]ou don't shoot X for what he did to Y, even though he deserves shooting."¹¹⁷ More knows that killing Comeaux and Van Dorn will not remove the human longing for death and self-destruction. The Comeauxs and Van Dorns of the world cannot be defeated entirely, nor can the impulse toward death be located within specific individuals who by their disposal will set the world aright. Instead, More says that "[y]ou allow X a

¹¹⁴ Young, 134.

¹¹⁵ Young, 129.

¹¹⁶ Percy, *Thanatos*, 234. To be clear, More does not pretend to need help for the sake of boosting the confidence of his patients. More describes how Ella, a patient who feared failure, discovered that she and he had attended the same high school and university and gave him two yearbooks. Giving More the yearbooks allowed Ella to remind her doctor about himself and his past. Ella helped More in a small, but nonetheless real way.

¹¹⁷ Percy, *Thanatos*, 332.

way out so he can help Y.”¹¹⁸ More’s strategy is not to convince someone that he is in need of someone else, but show him how he can help another person. Individuals, perhaps most of all liberal individuals who value autonomy, enjoy thinking of themselves as benefactors rather than beneficiaries. More knows that this tendency is a matter of individual vanity and reluctance to admit the need of another. As a practical matter, when one individual helps another, the action is not simply external but also operates internally on the doer and so brings about good to the doer as well as the recipient. Individuals are simultaneously a benefactor and a beneficiary. Needing and helping another person creates a relation to someone as another self and not an object to be manipulated. It is this full, comprehensive good that More sees is possible, but is impossible in Comeaux and Van Dorn’s envisioned societies.

More is remarkably successful at rehabilitating many of the lesser participants in the scientists’ scheme.¹¹⁹ But there is a limit to rehabilitation. Van Dorn returns to his “old self, his charming, grandiose, slightly phony Confederate self,” writes a splashy bestseller, and becomes a regular on TV talk-shows.¹²⁰ Comeaux quietly disappears—rumor has it—to China to assist in their one-child per family policy. Despite More’s best efforts, Van Dorn and Comeaux voluntarily refuse to be helped.

¹¹⁸ Percy, *Thanatos*, 332.

¹¹⁹ The grandest demonstration of More’s ability to find ways for individuals to help each other is the rehabilitation of the Belle Ame pedophiles, and Comeaux and Van Dorn’s penalty. The pedophiles, Mr. and Mrs. Brunette, Coach, and Mrs. Cheney, serve their sentence of five years of community service at St. Margaret’s Hospice. The Brunettes work with Alzheimer’s patients, Mrs. Cheney becomes a nurse aide for malformed children, and Coach starts a soccer team for the quarantined AIDS children. In this way, as Desmond observes, Percy shows that it is better “to put the culprits to constructive use in the community and help them recover their humanity than to banish them, yet at the same time safeguarding them and others from temptation” in *Walker Percy’s Search for Community* (Athens, GA, University of Georgia Press: 2004), 243. Even Van Dorn recovers from the heavy sodium effects after Eve, a gorilla who knows sign language, helps him recover language and, consequently, his humanity.

¹²⁰ Percy, *Thanatos*, 344.

Consequently, *The Thanatos Syndrome* does not end with a perfect resolution.

The project to add heavy sodium to the water supply is an example, even a crude example, not the real source of the impulse towards death and self-destruction. As Percy shows, “happily ever after” is a misguided ending for even the “good guys” who are also troubled and lost selves. Percy presents neither total triumph nor utter defeat, but shows that searching with others for hope that the self does not have to succumb to self-destruction.

Conclusion

In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, More wonders that if a drug can “turn a haunted soul into a bustling little body, why take on such a quixotic quest as pursuing the secret of one’s very self?”¹²¹ If a pill can relieve the self of its cares and burdens, engaging in the task of searching the self seems self-indulgent and perverse. Although as a psychiatrist More can prescribe psycho-pharmaceuticals, he mentions that he rarely prescribes does. The patient will feel better, he says, but “they’ll never find out what the terror is trying to tell them.”¹²² More points to the Enlightenment as the source of a distinctive type of modern anxiety and unhappiness: “this is not the Age of Enlightenment but the Age of Not Knowing What to Do.”¹²³ Consequently, pursuing happiness is “an odd pursuit,” because it is trying to be something that you are not, which is like trying to have another

¹²¹ Percy, *Thanatos*, 13.

¹²² Percy, *Thanatos*, 6. More is not against psycho-pharmaceutical in principle, but pragmatically prescribes them. The significance is that medicines that alter moods are not inherently bad, and may, in fact, be used to good purpose.

¹²³ Percy, *Thanatos*, 75.

eye color than the one you have.¹²⁴ The deep problem with the pursuit of happiness is that it sets people in pursuit of happiness in a manner that prevents them from recognizing that their manner of pursuit is precisely what prevents them from being relieved of their fear of anxiety. More's message to his patients who seek a cure is that there is not a cure. He suggests that "[m]aybe a cure is knowing there is no cure."¹²⁵ More does not cure his patients of their anxiety, but cures them of their expectation that they ought to be cured and helps them think of anxiety as a clue to self-understanding.

Likewise, through *The Moviegoer* and *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy draws his readers to consider unhappiness as a happy starting place for joint searches. Unhappiness draws us together because it points us toward understanding how we may help each other and need each other as we journey together through life. Searching with others separates Percy's approach from the scientist's and the stoic's. Neither science, with which Percy would closely align the pursuit of happiness, nor stoicism understands the human being as a needy, dependent being, who, above all, needs other people to live well. Yet, Percy does not point to our dependency as good in itself, but as a fortunate, or even happy circumstance. According to Percy, science and stoicism mistakenly exaggerate human autonomy or self-sufficiency. Yet humans are not helpless beings, but are able to help and be helped by each other. Through our capacity to help and be helped, our lives achieve greater well-being and contentment than we could know as pursuers of happiness.

¹²⁴ The pursuit of happiness takes two forms depending on whether one is a bluebird or jaybird. Bluebirds try to be happy and jaybirds try to act happy. Bluebirds are generally women who want to be happy and so seek the bluebird of happiness—the one thing that will bring happiness if only the object of desire can be attained. Jaybirds are commonly men who “[want] to do this or that, take this or that” and like a “noisy jaybird” try to demonstrate their success at happiness not simply to other people but to themselves (89).

¹²⁵ Percy, *Thanatos*, 76.

Percy remains deeply critical of the pursuit of happiness, as a pursuit of well-being that attempts to relieve the individual entirely of his unhappiness. The implicit compliment Percy pays to the United States is its presumption that the moral worth of the pursuit of happiness lies within the individual's free ability to determine the means of his pursuit. As a practical matter, the liberty left up to the individual to pursue happiness also allows for the search. Americans err insofar as we set happiness as the object of our pursuit and encourage the swiftest and surest attainment of it. Yet, there remains a strong presumption that the means of the pursuit—the free pursuit of happiness—matter for the sake of achieving the end. For Percy, the means of the search is important, because how we search ultimately determines what we will find. Through these novels, Percy argues for the integrity of the search as a means of living well over the pursuit of happiness.

Despite their differences, Wolfe and Percy agree that the individual cannot live well apart from society and, as we have seen, have done much to direct our attention away from individualistic pursuits and toward understanding finding the good life with others. Society inclines us to esteem the wrong things for the sake of happiness and it is our task to discern where our true interest and well-being lies. Wolfe admirably points to our need for viewpoint to give us courage to stand up to society and focuses on supplementing liberalism with ancient thought, particularly stoicism. On its own, Wolfe recognizes that stoicism is too self-sufficient and insular and unwilling to risk one's own internal happiness for the sake of another. Wolfe amends stoicism with liberalism's commitment to protect the weak and vulnerable against arbitrary force. Yet, Percy remains unconvinced. He is critical of stoicism precisely for the reason that he thinks it will contribute more to isolation and individualism than to fellow feeling and community.

Instead of turning to ancient sources, Percy reminds us of our common existential predicament and restores to us the fundamental question of "what shall I do" that the pursuit of happiness tries implicitly to answer. In searching to answer this question, Percy makes the search with others and as fellow wayfarers the means for living well.

Neither Wolfe nor Percy has much regard for traditional social structures and both are inclined to view social constraints with suspicion as forces bent on leading the individual toward wastrel and materialistic pursuits. Edith Wharton shows us another possibility in which society can beneficially constrain the individual for the sake of living well. In response to Wolfe and Percy, Wharton argues that to seek happiness outside of the social structure and the positions or roles in which we are born is to venture where happiness cannot be found. For Edith Wharton, Percy's supposed return to the fundamental question of our existence is self-indulgent and nonsensical. Wharton remains as critical of the pursuit of happiness as Percy, but faults the pursuit of happiness for encouraging individuals to seek the phantom of self-gratification and unmixed pleasure over the self-sacrifice and mixed happiness that characterizes human life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Edith Wharton's Case for the Individual's Happiness in Society

As we have seen, Wolfe's decentralized social groups and Percy's joint searches are ways of pursuing of happiness in the absence of traditional social structure, but Edith Wharton shows us how social structure shapes and constrains individuals and so provides a stable context in which individuals enjoy whole and cohesive lives. Wharton wrote at the turn of the 20th century, when traditional social order was intact, but crumbling under the force of the Industrial Revolution, mass immigration, the progressive movement and other social and political unrest. The Industrial Revolution gave rise to a new wealth-based class in which individuals were free from many traditional social constraints and encouraged to pursue wealth to their utmost ability as concurrent to the pursuit of happiness. Immigration brought waves of new peoples to the United States that traditional society could not incorporate. Finally, the progressive movement called for many reforms to restore public confidence in the political system including calls to clean up corruption, ensure broad democratic decision making procedures, and focus on national politics. Wharton lamented the decline of traditional society and the rise of the *nouveau riche's* unrestrained crass materialism and de facto takeover of society, but she was not a simple-minded defender of the status quo. Wharton, as a member of old New York society, was ably situated to comment both on the advantages that traditional society offered to the individual and also how society could abuse its authority over the individual.

Through her novels, Wharton depicts the confrontation between old and new society and what it means for the individual's happiness. Her characters press against social constraints in the interest of pursuing their happiness. In *The Custom of the Country*, the social barriers to satisfying Undine Spragg's desires prove thin. Wharton cautions against the pursuit of happiness as a dangerous individualistic pursuit of an unrealistic, idealized state of felicity and shows how this pursuit might deteriorate into an ugly, unhappy pursuit of appetite that fails to satiate. Thus, *The Custom of the Country* portrays the oft recognized problems that a commercial society poses for individual well-being. So too in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton portrays, without sentiment, the damaging extent to which society can abuse its authority over the individual. The protagonist of *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer, neither seeks mere material well-being nor is he as unscrupulous as Undine, but like Undine, he wants a perfected state of happiness free from all social complications. Newland wants a kind of spiritual well-being free from the consequences of social duty and personal choice, but learns the unrestrained pursuit of individual gratification and well-being cannot be used as a trump card that justifies betrayals of social duty and trust. While Undine's pursuit of happiness can never be satisfied and no social obligation—even the welfare of her child—serves to constrain her desires, Newland's romantic pursuit of the Countess Olenska is finally thwarted by his obligation as a father.

During her lifetime, Edith Wharton enjoyed much commercial and critical success from her writings including the award of the Pulitzer Prize in 1920 for *The Age of Innocence*.¹ A dividing line between Wharton scholars is whether Wharton defended the

¹ Millicent Bell presents a clear and well-organized short critical history of Wharton scholarship in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-19.

old social structure or disparaged it. Scholars differ because they emphasize either Wharton's conservative social views and politics or her criticisms of marriage and the education of women. Scholarship provides two Edith Whartons: a traditionalist or a feminist. In the traditionalist camp, nearly all contemporary Wharton commentators and some recent scholars argue that her writings champion a political and social conservatism that indicates her preference for the old ways against the rapid and destabilizing social and political transformations of the early 20th century. On the other hand, feminist scholars recognize in Wharton's writings on marriage and women profound criticisms of traditional society and calls for improved changes to the relations between men and women. There is some truth in both positions. Wharton, as I shall argue, saw both the value of traditional social structure for individual well-being, but also saw its failings and scope, particularly with respect to marriage, for reform.

Whether they are not or they are sympathetic with what they think is Wharton's perspective, early commentators agree that she upheld traditional society with little reservation. An early admirer of Wharton, Edmund Wilson argues that her novels are marked by a Puritan grimness that "we must face the unpleasant and the ugly" and that the conflict between the individual and society inevitably ends with characters "beating their heads against their prison or suffer a living death in resigning themselves to it."² With no flattery intended, Vernon L. Parrington calls Wharton "our outstanding literary aristocrat" and concluded that Wharton was a snob who displayed "an unquestioned acceptance of the aristocratic world."³ Parrington continues that she wasted her talent on

² Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).

³ Parrington is not completely insensitive to Wharton's satire of old New York society with which he readily identifies her, but interprets her satire as good-natured, poking fun rather than serious criticism of social practices. In reference to *The Age of Innocence*, he says that "though she laughs at the deification

depicting “rich nobodies,” and that she did not try to “understand America as it is,” unlike the naturalist school of writing.⁴ Wilson and Parrington, despite the difference in their evaluations of Wharton, both agree on Wharton’s high-mindedness and acceptance of the traditional order. Further solidifying the view of Wharton as traditionalist, Percy Lubbock, an early biographer, depicts Wharton as a prudish, aristocratic, and conservative defender of the old ways.⁵ For a long time, Wharton was associated with a discredited past and unpopular elitist view that prevented her from being counted among America’s best literary authors.

Despite attempts to raise Wharton’s standing, such as Bruce Nevius’s book length study of her novels and a collection of critical essays edited by Irving Howe, it was not until the 1970s that a new biography and the rise of feminist theory did Edith Wharton, made into a proto-feminist, begin her ascent to the rank of first rate American author.⁶ R. W. B. Lewis helped to revitalize her reputation with his Pulitzer Prize winning biography that depicted Wharton as a more sympathetic, energetic and erotic personality than Lubbock’s prim characterization.⁷ Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, a biographical analysis of Wharton’s writings, also sparked

of ‘form’ by the van der Luydens of Skuytercliff, and the tyranny of their rigid social taboos, she loves them too well to suffer them to be forgotten by a careless generation,” in Vernon L. Parrington, “Our Literary Aristocrat,” *Pacific Review* 2 (June 1921), 157.

⁴ Parrington, 159.

⁵ Percy Lubbock, *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1947).

⁶ Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961) and Irving Howe, ed., *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1962).

⁷ R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1975).

interest in the new sympathetic Wharton.⁸ Wharton quickly became a darling of feminist scholars for both her personal history as a divorcee who enjoyed a successful literary career and the long overlooked evidence of her sharp criticism of marriage in her novels.⁹ Millicent Bell observes how Wharton's personal life prompted an "identification" with Wharton and also that she "began to be seen as one of feminism's foremothers—who, though talented and rich, suffered the persisting ordeal of all women struggling for personal and professional self-definition in a male-dominated world."¹⁰ With much success, feminist scholars argue that Wharton confronted in her novels the worst evils perpetrated by old New York society upon women. The unhappy marriages and frustrated lovers in her novels are proofs of how rigid social conventions harmed women. Subsequent scholarship has discussed in-depth how Wharton critiqued America's male-dominated society.¹¹

In reaction, some scholars argue that feminist scholars have been too quick to identify Wharton with their liberal causes. As Jennie A. Kassanoff argues, since feminist theorists revitalized the study of Wharton based on the connection between Wharton's

⁸ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁹ Wharton's life is nearly a feminist's storybook (anti-)romance. As the daughter of the best of New York society, she was matched with Teddy Wharton, a respectable Bostonian, whom she dutifully married. Their marriage proved unhappy and Edith turned to writing. After a passionate extramarital affair fizzled, Wharton divorced her husband and set up permanent residency in France where she cultivated a new, independent life and continued her successful literary career. See, for example, Gloria C. Erlich's *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Bell, 13.

¹¹ Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1980); Carol Wershoven, *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982); Wendy Gimbel, *Edith Wharton: Orphanhood and Survival* (New York: Praeger, 1984), Judith Fryer, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), and Katherine Joslin, *Women Writers: Edith Wharton* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

criticism of marriage and the feminist project, scholars have been unwilling to look honestly and closely at her social and racial classifications and often anti-liberal politics. According to Kassanoff, contemporary scholars are guilty of oversimplifying conservative political perspectives and overlooking the complexity of their arguments. In reaction, some scholars argue that feminist scholars have been too quick to identify Wharton with their liberal causes. In contrast, Kassanoff contends that Wharton shared the concerns of many of her class that the foreign and poor would “overwhelm the native elite,” that American culture would reflect the gauche tastes of the masses, and that “the country’s oligarchy would fail to reproduce itself and thereby commit ‘race suicide.’”¹² Thus, Kassanoff finds deep currents of racist and anti-liberal thought underlying Wharton’s works that ultimately support an elitist class and social structure.

However, in Kassanoff’s attempt to take seriously Wharton’s supposed illiberal politics, she is unable to account for Wharton’s severe critique of her old New York society. Indeed, it has not been easy for commentators to put together both Wharton’s critique of society and her traditionalism. A better attempt has been made by Robin Peel, who argues that even though Wharton did not publish a treatise on politics, it is possible to trace the “implicit politics of her imaginative work.”¹³ Like Kassanoff, Robin Peel holds that Wharton accepted the conservatism of her “Old New York principles,” and rejected the rise of modernism in art, literature and politics at the turn of the 20th

¹² Jennie A. Kassanoff, *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3 and 4. See also Elizabeth Ammons, “Edith Wharton and Race,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, ed. Millicent Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 68-97.

¹³ Robin Peel, *Apart from Modernism: Edith Wharton, Politics, and Fiction before World War I* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 2005), 14.

century.¹⁴ In contrast to Kassanoff, however, Peel attempts to link together both Wharton's conservatism and her criticism of old New York society. Peel argues that Wharton's writings served as an outlet for her to question and critique her inherited conservatism. Publicly, Wharton resisted the rapid changes in society, but in her writings, she "explore[d] and interrogate[d] a range of political beliefs, some progressive and radical, which are presented in a far more liberal and subtle way than her public posture of...American Toryism would lead us to expect."¹⁵ Wharton believed firmly that society shaped the individual and so rejected much of modernism's emphasis on the priority of the individual over society. On social and political questions, Wharton did not part with her inherited ideas that society trumped the individual, but from a keen aesthetic sense, she understood that "all art, including literature, has evolved and must evolve, if it is to be vital and serious."¹⁶ Moreover, Wharton saw that modernism built its success from the faults and weakness present in the old order.

Kassanoff and Peel recognize Wharton as a distinctive American political thinker and correct some of the deficiencies in the scholarship that overlooked Wharton's resistance to and criticism of many of the political and social changes brought about by the industrial revolution, progressivism, immigration, World War I and other rapid changes that contributed to the demise of old and traditional social order in the United States. More so than Kassanoff, Peel argues for a more complex reading of Wharton's relationship to her old New York society and conservatism. Peel rightfully sees how Wharton presents a range of perspectives in her novels and questions both traditional

¹⁴ Peel, 11.

¹⁵ Peel, 12.

¹⁶ Peel, 12.

society and the new social order coming into being during Wharton's lifetime. But Peel only finds coherence in Wharton's views by making Wharton into a passive explorer of these ideas in her writings. Peel creates a dual image of Wharton as the public conservative and the insightful novelist that leaves us with two Edith Whartons.

In contrast, I argue that through depicting the shortcomings of traditional society and exposing the errors and threats presented by aspects of current social change, Wharton engages in a political act to expose the abuses of society's authority, but also shows that its authority is legitimate and its power necessary to constrain the individual. Throughout her writings, Wharton distinguishes traditional society from the self-absorbed and money making pursuits of the *nouveau riche*. Wharton carves a moderate course between traditional society and the demands for political, economic, and social reform in which leadership comes from traditional ranks. Above all, she sought to disabuse her readers of the notion that living a good life is gratification of every desire as the *nouveau riche* seemed to believe. The pursuit of happiness does not justify breaking moral rules and deceiving the people closest to us. Instead, such a self-absorbed quest contributes to social fragmentation and an inchoate individual life in which happiness though ever pursued cannot be caught. Honoring social trust is a higher good than individual gratification and one that can bring an individual contentment. Traditional society connected the individual to other individuals through moral obligations and so provided coherence and wholeness to individual life that is needful for living well.

The Custom of the Country

The Custom of the Country's protagonist, Undine Spragg, illustrates through her "incessant movements" the restlessness and destructiveness of the individual pursuit of

happiness that accompanied the new moneyed class.¹⁷ Undine was “always doubling and twisting on herself” and through her “incessant movements” she intended “to be animated in society,” because “noise and restlessness were her only notion of vivacity.”¹⁸ *The Custom of the Country* depicts not only how the pursuit of happiness, or of personal gratification, dissolves social ties and makes for incommodious living, but also defeats its purpose and fails to satisfy Undine or bring any respite from the inchoate desires that drive Undine.

The Custom of the Country begins with Undine Spragg and her parents who moved from Apex (somewhere ambiguously in the Mid-West or West) to New York City where Undine had expected to be welcomed into the best society, but for two years, her attempts have been frustrated. Peter Van Degen, the rich son of a banker, leads a new crowd of wealthy New Yorkers that Undine wants to join. Unconnected to the concerns and obligations of traditional society, Van Degen married into traditional society for the sake of respectability, but his interest lies in imagining new delights.¹⁹ At a party given by popular portrait artist, Claud Walsingham Pople, Undine’s remarkable beauty attracts Ralph Marvell of the old New York Dagonet family that lives in Washington Square. Undine learns that the Marvells are better society, but she does not realize that they represent traditional society not the flashy, trendy new society to which she is attracted. Unwittingly, Undine delights in the idea of entering a new “inner circle” where she expected that “[s]he was going to know the right people at last—she was going to get

¹⁷ Edith Wharton, (*The Custom of the Country*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 15.

¹⁸ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 5 and 15.

¹⁹ Van Degen is called “an inventor of amusements,” at which “he’s inexhaustible” (115).

what she wanted!”²⁰ Unfortunately for Undine, her marriage into the Marvell family is just the one of many new beginnings (not even the first in her life) in which Undine expects that she has finally found the right “set” that will fulfill her. However, every time Undine catches sight of a new social circle, her present circumstances are “spoiled by a peep through another door.”²¹

Although trained as a lawyer, Ralph Marvell works in earnest little and aspires to write. He is attracted to Undine both for her beauty and for what he perceives as a similarity between the Dagonets and the Spraggs as “plain people,” though the Spraggs “had not yet learned to be ashamed of it.”²² Ralph determines to save Undine from the vulgarism and materialism of Van Degen’s society. Not until they are married does Ralph realize that Undine has no desire to be saved from “Van Degenism.”²³ Undine delights in new pleasures and amusements and soon Ralph obtains a job in business—a job for which he is ill suited and inept—to provide Undine with money to satisfy her ever-expanding desires. After her marriage and throughout her life, Undine’s parents continue to supplement her income at the expense of their material diminishment. Undine is disappointed in Ralph’s inability to earn enough money to supply her wants and decides to divorce him. Undine divorces Ralph, but fails to secure the wealthy Van Degen as a husband. Diminished in status and wealth, Undine goes abroad to France, leaving her son with Ralph, and attracts the aristocratic Raymond de Chelles into proposing marriage. But as a divorced woman trying to marry a catholic, Undine must

²⁰ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 19.

²¹ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 35. Undine was plagued by the idea that “[t]here was something still better beyond, then—more luxurious, more exciting, more worthy of her!” (34).

²² Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 51.

²³ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 115.

secure an annulment of her marriage to Ralph. To obtain the money necessary to secure an annulment, Undine uses her legal custody of her son as a pawn to extract a large sum of money from Ralph, who had continued to care for their son in New York.²⁴ Bitter at his failure to have fought for legal custody during the divorce (when it might have been possible to gain custody) and shocked upon learning that Undine had been married previous to their marriage, Ralph commits suicide.

Life with Raymond at his ancestral family estate also proves a disappointment where the collective pressure of centuries of familial duty and responsibility present in Raymond's character are more than Undine can overcome.²⁵ Undine returns to the United States, divorces Raymond, and quickly remarries her first husband and now millionaire, Elmer Moffatt. As for Raymond, to cover Undine's and his brother's debts, he must sell family treasures. Paul, Undine's son with Ralph, is sent away to school. Paul is lonely and longs for stability and the fatherly affection he knew from Raymond, his "French father," as he calls him. Although having finally obtained a steady supply of wealth, Undine shows dissatisfaction with Elmer Moffatt's uncouth manners and is disappointed that Elmer could not be appointed as an ambassador to England, because he is married to a divorcee who could not be received at court. The novel ends with Undine unhappy, because she sees "there was something she could never get."²⁶ Undine's glimpse into diplomatic society mars her present delight and financial security and she

²⁴ If Ralph gave her enough money, then Undine would not press her custodial right for her son and thus leave him in Ralph's and his family's care.

²⁵ "[S]he felt herself in the grasp of circumstances stronger than any effort she could oppose to them" (322).

²⁶ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 377.

wishes that she could be an ambassador's wife. Traditions, once again, are both incomprehensible to her and stand in the way of her desires.

Edmund Wilson called Undine Spragg "an international cocktail bitch."²⁷ Critics tend to consider Undine an anti-hero although few have been as direct as Wilson.²⁸ Elaine Showalter argues that Elmer Moffatt is portrayed more kindly than Undine, because his artistic sensibilities distinguish him from Undine, who cannot understand how Elmer enjoys the art he collected. Showalter concludes that Undine is "utterly without aesthetic sensibilities, and for Wharton this is the unpardonable sin."²⁹ For Wharton, Showalter argues, art holds the possibility of transcending social constraints, which block the individual from achieving the object of his desires. Elmer Moffatt transcends through his love of art life's disappointments whereas Undine finds no solace when denied what she desires. Yet, Undine has her defenders. Among her strongest defenders, Ammons argues that Undine takes control of her life by "negotiat[ing] herself on the marriage market" since, as a woman, she is unable to achieve material success through business as men, like Elmer Moffatt, can.³⁰ Another Undine defender, Carol Baker Sabora, makes the similar case that although Undine is ruthless and unlikable, Undine seeks material success in marriage the way men do in business. Wharton exposes the double standard for men and women by depicting Undine and allowing us to see how

²⁷ Wilson, 24.

²⁸ See Harold Bloom's introduction to *Edith Wharton* (New York: Chelsea, 1986), 1-3; Janet Malcolm, "The Woman Who Hated Women," *New York Times Book Review* (November 16, 1986), and Elaine Showalter, "Spragg: The Art of the Deal," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, ed. Millicent Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁹ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 94.

³⁰ Ammons, *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, 98. See also Wolff, *A Feast of Words*, 249, and Marilyn French's introduction to Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (New York: Berkley, 1981).

men negatively evaluate Undine's methods. According to Sapora, "men do not like seeing their tactics reflected in a woman and they do not admit to recognizing the baseness of their standards when turned against them."³¹ For Ammons and Sapora, gender, not morals or aesthetic appreciation, distinguishes Undine and Moffatt, and Undine's exclusion from competing with men in business justifies her ruthless actions.

In contrast to Ammons and Sapora and without Wilson's severity, Linda Costanzo Cahir argues that Undine has flashes of humanity in which she momentarily forgets her self-interest. Cahir points to one instance in which Undine and Moffatt reminisce about their short courtship and marriage in Apex and Undine speak admiringly of Moffatt.³² Yet, Cahir concludes, "[i]n the end, however, we wonder if Undine has lost even this brief whisper of humanity."³³ Undine may be, as Cahir believes, capable of sincere other-regarding thought, but this serves to highlight her destructive self-gratification. As I will show, Undine imitates, deceives, and even bullies those closest to her in her quest to be happy, because she is suspicious of other people. Her boundless desires threaten to overwhelm any design on lasting happiness. Relying solely on herself, Undine tries to restrain her own desires but fails. However, Undine's efforts yield little, and she finds no lasting happiness. As I will argue, the unrestrained pursuit of private gratification that animates Undine Spragg prevents her from knowing and enjoying the goodness in the things she gains and threatens to undermine her purpose to be happy.

³¹ Carol Baker Sapora, "Undine Spragg, the Mirror and the Lamp in *The Custom of the Country*," in *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors*, 281.

³² After Undine tells Moffatt how she had admired his strength and the way he flouted Apex conventions, Wharton says that "[s]he had never spoken more sincerely. For the moment all thought of self-interest was in abeyance, and she felt again, as she had felt that day, the instinctive yearning of her nature to be one with his" (362).

³³ Linda Costanzo Cahir, *Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 40.

Undine's greatest talent is for imitation and reflection as ways to ingratiate herself with those whom she believes will prove useful acquaintances. She succeeds in seducing Van Degen by giving him “a taste of his own methods.”³⁴ Van Degen enjoys “Undine’s ‘smartness’, which was of precisely the same quality as his own.”³⁵ The clearest example of Undine intentionally transforming herself for the sake of appealing to someone is with Princess Estradina. When the Princess introduces herself to Undine, Undine quickly tries “to think far enough ahead to guess what they [the Princess and her mother, the Duchess] would expect her to say, and what tone it would be well to take.”³⁶ Undine is well-practiced at conforming herself to her company’s expectations of her. Wharton says that “it was *instinctive* with her to become, for the moment, the person she thought her interlocutors expected her to be” (emphasis mine).³⁷ Having no stable identity of her own, Undine takes her cues from others. Yet, imitation succeeds only so far. Undine can only reflect and not add anything new to conversation; the Princess soon discovers the limits of Undine’s company. Conversation requires that there is some spiritual and intellectual distinction between participants. If there is no “otherness,” then conversation holds all the interest of silently staring into a mirror. Undine is not insensible to her shortcoming—she realizes that “she had been a slight disappointment to the Princess,” but she does not know why or how to correct it.³⁸

³⁴ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 183.

³⁵ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 183.

³⁶ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 243.

³⁷ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 243. In her uncanny ability to imitate the people she is with, Undine resembles Woody Allen’s character Zelig (from the film *Zelig*) who can physically transform himself to be like whomever he is with.

³⁸ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 246.

Nor is Undine likely to learn. There are occasions when it takes more than an imitative ability to adapt oneself to one's group. Imitation proves insufficient for Undine when on multiple occasions she tries to contribute her thoughts and ideas, because she has never cultivated her own ideas. At Undine's first dinner with Ralph's sister, Laura Fairford's conversation is coordinated like a "concert and not a solo" in which Mrs. Fairford, like a capable conductor, brings everyone into the conversation.³⁹ Wharton, no doubt punning on Mrs. Fairford's name, presents Mrs. Fairford as a fair-minded conversationalist who is a foil to Undine. Like a good ruler, Mrs. Fairford guides conversation so that all participate and share their ideas with the gathering. Undine proves difficult to incorporate into conversation since she has little interest in art exhibits, reads only romantic books, and is unable to discuss the plays she has seen. Moreover, Undine remains distrustful of Mrs. Fairford's attempts to draw her into the conversation, because she is more interested in observing mannerisms and remembering gossip. She speaks only brief and impersonal comments such as "I don't care if I do" to an offer of grapes and says "I wouldn't wonder" if she thought her interlocutor was trying to "astonish her."⁴⁰ These impersonal and guarded comments demonstrate her suspicion of her fellow companions. In particular, Undine's guarded comments to those whom she believe try to "astonish her" reveal her fear that those who share something that she does not understand may be trying to best her or manipulate her. Suspicion and fear mark Undine's relationships to others and prevent her from learning how to participate in good conversation.

³⁹ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 22.

⁴⁰ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 23

Attempts to gain opinions and views so that she might be considered a desirable conversationalist and good company also fail Undine. During her marriage with Raymond, Undine is distressed to be invited only to impersonal dinner parties and not the more intimate and socially desirable parties. Madame de Trézac explains that it is because she is a boring conversationalist. To remedy this, Undine makes a few attempts to “cultivat[e] herself” and “went so far as to spend a morning in the Louvre and go to one or two lectures by a fashionable philosopher.”⁴¹ Despite returning with many opinions, she is disappointed in her attempt to wow people with her opinions and insights. Undine’s attempts to add to conversation are “confused,” “nebulous,” trivial and commonplace, and more often than not “produced more bewilderment than interest.”⁴² She mistakes the purpose of conversation to be a showcase for ideas, like a gallery of pictures, rather than the exchange and development of ideas shared in speech with others. Failing at self-cultivation, Undine turns to “the scientific cultivation of her beauty.”⁴³

Yet, Undine casts no simple reflection and beneath her reflective surface is deception and manipulation. To get what she wants, Undine crafts particular appeals designed to invoke sympathetic sentiments in the listener. In the hopes of convincing Van Degen to help her divorce her husband, Undine tells him that she is “unhappy.”⁴⁴ Sharing a similar understanding of individual happiness, Van Degen agrees and says to

⁴¹ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 345.

⁴² Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 345.

⁴³ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 345.

⁴⁴ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 147.

her “[y]ou oughtn’t to be bound for life by a girl’s mistake.”⁴⁵ But when Undine tells her father “I’m unhappy at home,” Mr. Spragg is not swayed.⁴⁶ Undine realizes that “sentimental casuistry” will not achieve the desired result with her father.⁴⁷ Deftly, she shifts gears to stir her father’s pride as a businessman and self-made man against her husband’s family. She says that Ralph’s aristocratic family does not approve of making money, resents that Ralph must work in business, and believes that Mr. Spragg ought to support financially Undine and their child. Likewise, to gain Moffatt’s sympathy to help her divorce Raymond, Undine recounts Raymond’s overbearing and exacting attention towards her during the first few months after their marriage to present the image of “herself entrapped into a bondage hardly conceivable to Moffatt”—although she presently enjoyed a “liberated state” in which Raymond took little interest in her activities and company.⁴⁸

In addition to imitation and deception, Undine bullies. Bullying is a more direct method of pressuring people to do what is wanted whenever there is no advantage to presenting a pleasing exterior and little risk of not getting what one wants. Undine’s instances of bullying are her most honest moments. With her parents, Undine frequently resented that she had to “struggle for her rights”—for what she believed she was due.⁴⁹ She did not like fighting for what she believed she was owed, “[b]ut she could not help if

⁴⁵ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 147.

⁴⁶ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 151.

⁴⁷ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 151.

⁴⁸ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 356.

⁴⁹ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 29.

they [her parents] were unreasonable.”⁵⁰ As a consequence, Mrs. Spragg vacillates between a “life-long instinct of obedience and swift unformulated fear” with regard to her daughter.⁵¹ Undine neither honors her parents nor shows any indication of feeling indebted to them. In fact, she feels only resentment that they resist her demands in the slightest. While Undine experiences frustration with her parents in her attempts to bend them to her wishes, we also see that Undine takes pleasure in browbeating her social inferiors. After a successful round of bargaining with her French dressmakers, she says to Ralph, “you ought to see how I’ve beaten them down!”⁵² Dressmakers are hardly on the same social ground as Undine and, therefore, are particularly defenseless to abusive patrons. Like all bullies, Undine glories in her personal triumph of strength over social vulnerability. As a final instance, while in the company of the Princess Estradina, Undine is reacquainted with Madame de Trézac, a fellow American and former Miss Wincher who had been disdainful of Undine in their youth. Undine fears that Madame de Trézac will provide the Princess with fuller and less flattering information about her past. When Madame de Trézac does not and, in fact, seeks to gain Undine’s favor, Undine relishes her new power over her childhood rival.

Imitation, deception, and bullying do not always gain Undine what she wants and her boundless desires threaten to swallow up her chances for securing lasting happiness. But since she refuses social restraints, Undine must rely on herself and tries to forego short term pleasures for the sake of long term gain—“her impatience to enjoy was curbed

⁵⁰ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 29.

⁵¹ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 67.

⁵² Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 107.

by an instinct for holding off and biding her time.”⁵³ Mr. Spragg’s “patient skill” with which he sold real estate to further the Pure Water Move in Apex that jumped started his success provides a model for Undine.⁵⁴ More than once, Undine is admonished to “go steady” in her spending.⁵⁵ Mrs. Heeny, a manicurist, masseuse, and gossip, tells Undine to “[g]o steady, Undine, and you’ll get anywheres.”⁵⁶ “Going steady” is a short-hand way of referring to the calculated “patient skill” and restraint from indulging in pleasures needed to make a “good turn” whether in business or in life.⁵⁷ To be clear, “going steady” is not the virtue of moderation, but a lesser order kind of self-restraint. As discussed in chapter 1, “going steady” is essentially Locke’s advice to suspend satisfaction for the sake of future enjoyment. Locke’s advice passes for moderation in the United States, but it is not a virtue. Since it is not good for its own sake, but for future enjoyment, if the individual is incapable of holding the future objective firmly in mind, Lockean self-restraint is, not surprisingly, undermined by the desire for satisfaction of immediate desires. Undine has a hard time focusing on future objectives. Reckless in her eagerness for Van Degen’s wealth, Undine has an affair with him and uses his money before divorcing Ralph and marrying Van Degen.⁵⁸ After her failure to secure Van Degen as a husband, Undine undertakes an ambitious project “to lay a solid foundation before she began to build up the light superstructure of enjoyment.”⁵⁹ “Going steady”

⁵³ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 128.

⁵⁴ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 128.

⁵⁵ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 11.

⁵⁶ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 16.

⁵⁷ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 286.

⁵⁸ Wharton notes that “she could not always resist the present pleasure” (128).

⁵⁹ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 148.

requires a level of disciplined self-restraint and stability of purpose that Undine does not have.

Not only does Undine struggle to sustain periods of deprivation for an imagined future state, but her lack of self-reflection and internalization makes it difficult for her to assimilate her past experience. She has as much trouble retaining the past as she does restraining herself with a view to the future. Unconnected to tradition, she is almost without memory: "Over a nature so insensible to the spells of memory, the visible and tangible would always prevail."⁶⁰ Prior to divorcing Ralph and still just flirtatious with Van Degen, Undine takes a ride in his car, and she "felt the rush of physical joy that drowns scruples and silences memory."⁶¹ In fact, we find out that on this occasion Undine has entirely forgotten to take her son, Paul, to his birthday party. Yet, for Wharton, memory is a key to learning and maturity. Although Undine "remembered her failures as keenly as her triumphs," memory proves hard for Undine to hold so as to learn from it.⁶² Shortly after her failure with Van Degen, Undine recalls her affair as "a series of pictures monotonously unrolled" before her mind.⁶³ Monotonous repetition in her mind of the events replaces any assimilation of experience. During her marriage with Raymond, it is revealed that Undine does not remember any of her "sentimental" relationship prior to her life in New York.⁶⁴ Not until Moffatt reappears in France does Undine recall memories from her prior marriage with him in Apex: "The thought sent

⁶⁰ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 148-49.

⁶¹ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 27.

⁶² Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 62.

⁶³ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 230.

⁶⁴ "As to her earlier experiences, she had frankly forgotten them: her sentimental memories went back no farther than the beginning of her New York career" (307).

her memory flying back to things she had turned it from for years."⁶⁵ Part of Undine's discontent with Moffatt is his lack of class in comparison with Ralph and Raymond "who were gradually becoming merged in her memory."⁶⁶ Undine can barely distinguish between her previous husbands, but fondly recalls their manners and good graces. She has forgotten how their sense of social and familial obligation was incompatible with her self-indulgence and extravagant expenses. We can imagine an Undine who would divorce Elmer Moffatt and marry another aristocratically bred man and find again that his sensibilities collide with her own. Undine's attempt to restrain her desires at least for the purpose of securing future and lasting happiness is undermined by her personal lack of coherence.

It is possible that Undine's means, however selfish, could justify her end and goal to be happy, but Undine finds little satisfaction in the things she gets. Despite being dedicated to chasing after amusement and delight, Undine "gains little spontaneous enjoyment from them."⁶⁷ Her pleasures do not come from her enjoyment of the things she attains, but fluctuate depending on how she observes other people enjoy or dismiss the same things. Seeing someone show disdain or contempt for something she had wanted devalues the object immediately and she exhibits aversion as quickly as she had displayed delight. At a Virginia summer resort Undine overhears Miss Wincher, a young lady also staying at the resort, complaining about "this dreadful hole," and consequently "[t]he place was forever blighted for her."⁶⁸ In another instance, Undine

⁶⁵ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 349.

⁶⁶ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 376.

⁶⁷ Sapora, 274.

⁶⁸ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 35 and 37.

notes that there are empty boxes at the opera and wonders about the owners and “what rarer delight could they be tasting?”⁶⁹ Thereafter, Undine does not attend the opera again, but she is unable to imagine superior pleasures. Since value is external to an object, an object loses value when someone shows disdain towards it, because Undine recognizes no intrinsic goodness in it. In contrast, traditional society cultivates an understanding of how to enjoy the goodness of things. When Raymond realizes the unbridgeable gap between Undine and himself, Raymond angrily says to her:

You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about...and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us!⁷⁰

Since Undine values things based on how much they are desired by someone else, she distances herself from the possibility of really enjoying and knowing their goodness.

The exception is that Undine cannot be manipulated or nudged toward superior pleasures. Ralph hopes that through his guidance and influence, he will develop Undine’s aesthetic tastes. To this end, Ralph and Undine travel to Italy for their honeymoon and he tries to share with her the pleasures of Italy’s natural beauty, sitting in cathedrals at sunset, and reading poetry. Undine is bored by the stillness and heat, and instead longs for “a crowd.”⁷¹ When Ralph tries “influence her through her social instincts,” she will not be swayed to desire aesthetic experiences. Yet, when married to Elmer Moffatt, Undine recognizes that he enjoys art in ways that she cannot understand

⁶⁹ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 39.

⁷⁰ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 347.

⁷¹ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 94.

or share and that he had other “enjoyments [that] were beyond her range.”⁷² However, Elmer Moffatt’s pleasures “appealed to her because of the money that was required to gratify them.”⁷³ Aside from artistic enjoyment, Wharton does specify in this instance what delights are “beyond” Undine understanding, but it is clear that Undine knows how to value them only because she witnesses Elmer’s conspicuous consumption of money.

Moreover, for Undine this means that everything has a cash value and nothing has a stable identity of its own. As Ralph’s wife, Undine resets two pieces of his family jewelry. Ralph is troubled that “she had been unconscious of the wound she inflicted [to his family] in destroying the identity of the jewels.”⁷⁴ As Raymond’s wife, Undine wants to sell his family’s tapestries to pay for her debts and keep her in the lifestyle she thinks she deserves. The tapestries have been in the family for generations and represent stability and continuity from generation to generation. She does not understand why Raymond is upset or why he would want to keep his family’s old tapestries instead of converting them into quick cash. All Undine considers when she “lay[s] hands on things that are sacred to us [Raymond’s family]” is what its market value is.⁷⁵ She is not at all curious why her husbands enjoy art or care about preserving family treasures—that there might be something intrinsic to art or to the identity of things passed down through generations that makes it worthwhile.

Undine receives so little pleasure from her activities and is so alienated from certain kinds of pleasures that to find any measure of satisfaction required an “intensity of

⁷² Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 358.

⁷³ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 358.

⁷⁴ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 136.

⁷⁵ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 347.

her sensations” unspoiled by any other consideration.⁷⁶ Something inevitably arises that puts a “crease in the smooth surface of existence” that she longs for—a blighted pleasure or perhaps a new desire.⁷⁷ A secure source of income to feed Undine’s desires promises to give her “[p]eace of mind.”⁷⁸ Peace of mind is Undine’s true wish and what she believes “was all she needed to make her happy.”⁷⁹ The agitated pursuit of happiness is the search for relief from the pursuit, but it is a peace unlikely to be found—“she was beginning to learn that success may be as fatiguing as failure.”⁸⁰ In a unique literary comparison of Undine and Herman Melville’s Captain Ahab, Linda Constanzo Cahir argues that Undine, like Ahab, “tries again and again to strike through the mask of the apparent (best) to the real (best); and, like Ahab, she will never rest until her impossible pursuit is complete.”⁸¹ Anything less than the smooth untroubled ease and comfort Undine imagines being her ultimate goal spurs her onward. Since her marriage to Ralph had not given her peace of mind, Undine has an affair with Van Degen calculated to entice him to help her divorce Ralph and to marry her. Undine divorces three times and remarries her first husband, Moffatt. While this fourth marriage may at first seem like a happy return to a past she should have embraced earlier, her remarriage to Moffatt signals a deeper failure. She has not progressed toward her goal of peace of mind.

⁷⁶ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 144.

⁷⁷ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 144.

⁷⁸ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 129.

⁷⁹ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 129.

⁸⁰ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 127.

⁸¹ Cahir, 38-39.

Thus, as Cecelia Tichi notes, “[t]he novel ends at a pause, not a conclusion.”⁸² Undine’s remarriage represents a “cyclical” return to where she started—not satisfaction but endless cycling.⁸³ Elmer Moffatt’s gauche manners and lack of class grate on Undine’s nerves and she reminisces fondly of Ralph and Raymond’s grace of manners. Yet, it is her ambition to become an ambassador’s wife that suggests that another divorce in her future. Although the novel ends with the observation that divorced women cannot be the wives of ambassadors, Cahir argues that the ending is more ambivalent than many commentators believe. Instead of believing that Undine has finally met an unbreakable social rule, Cahir argues that given Undine’s history of overcoming the “seeming impossible” (i.e. her marriage to Raymond) she will find a way to become an ambassador’s wife.⁸⁴

The Custom of the Country does not have a happy ending and suggests an uncertain future. Although Undine does not appreciate the social cost to her hopeless pursuit of happiness, Undine’s insatiable desires contributes to lasting damage to the lives of others. Undine impoverishes her parents, Ralph commits suicide, Raymond is financially ruined and forced to sell his family’s tapestries, and Paul, her son, is neglected. Yet, the most pitiable harm Undine does is to herself. The closest Undine comes to self-reflection is literal not metaphorical—she enjoys looking at herself in mirrors. As a child, her “chief delight was to ‘dress up’ in her mother’s Sunday skirt and ‘play lady’ before the wardrobe mirror.”⁸⁵ As an adult, she still played in front of the

⁸² Cecelia Tichi, “Emerson, Darwin, and *The Custom of the Country*,” in *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*, ed. Carol J. Singley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 96.

⁸³ Tichi, 96.

⁸⁴ Cahir, 38.

⁸⁵ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 15.

mirror or “dramatizing her beauty” as she did before attending dinner at Mrs. Fairford’s.⁸⁶ Undine’s dumb pantomime before a mirror indicates the poverty of her internal self and the value she places on the image of herself rather than on herself. At the novel’s end and in an image that mirrors (pun intended) the first image of Undine parading in front of a mirror, we see that Undine gains little critical perspective from her reflected countenance. Looking at her reflection, she is “lost in this pleasing contemplation.”⁸⁷ So absorbed in her reflection, she barely notices when her current husband, Elmer Moffatt, enters the room. Undine enjoys immensely these moments of unmixed pleasure that arise from the loss of herself in her reflection. These are not mere instances of overweening vanity. Captivated by her reflection, Undine the person is lost to Undine the image. To see how Undine’s fate can be avoided, I turn to Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* in which Newland Archer struggles with Undine-like desires for personal gratification, but is saved from her fate by realizing his social responsibility.

The Age of Innocence

The Age of Innocence is set in the 1870s—on the eve of many of the social, political, and economic transformations that precipitated the decline of old traditional families that assumed the top ranks of society in the New York of Wharton’s childhood. The setting is not Wharton’s sentimental escape to the protected and enclosed society of her childhood. Traditional society appears safely insulated, but the story opens at the old opera house that was favored by conservative New York for “being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the ‘new people’ whom New York was beginning to

⁸⁶ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 15.

⁸⁷ Wharton, *Custom of the Country*, 376.

dread and yet be drawn to.”⁸⁸ For example, Julius Beaufort, a wealthy English émigré banker with no known background, marries into one of New York’s finest families. Traditional society is still ascendant, but is already on the defense. The social constraints that keep Newland and Ellen separate in this novel will soon be swept away. The beginnings of progressive social and political causes, mass immigration, new technologies, and rapid business and industrial expansion that eventually bring an end to Old New York society have begun to make themselves felt. As the old establishment weakens, it becomes more rigid and exacting in its rules.

Wharton introduces Newland as a young man who has idealized expectations for his wife. He wants her to be both “worldly-wise and eager to please,” and he does not trouble himself to consider “[h]ow this miracle of fire and ice was to be created.”⁸⁹ At the opera, a dark haired, stylishly dressed woman sits with the Mingott family, which includes his fiancé, May Welland. Her presence causes a stir among the audience who know that she is the Countess Ellen Olenska, May Welland’s cousin, who has left her Polish husband and returned to New York. Although Newland approves of “family solidarity,” he is surprised at their audacity to bring her publicly (at the opera no less!) into the family. It is customary to wait to announce engagements, but May Welland and Newland Archer decide to announce it early at the much anticipated ball after the opera for the sake of aligning both their families behind Ellen’s arrival. However, Newland would have preferred “that the necessity of their action had been represented by some ideal reason” instead of Ellen’s sake.⁹⁰ In spite of Newland’s initial dislike of Ellen’s

⁸⁸ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*. (New York: Bantam Books, 2006), 3.

⁸⁹ Wharton, *Innocence*, 6.

⁹⁰ Wharton, *Innocence*, 20.

bold evening clothes and her flippant manners, Newland agrees to the early announcement, because, as May assures him, ‘it’s right.’”⁹¹

The families exert much effort to secure Ellen in New York society, which is successful only after one of the very few truly aristocratic families, the van der Luydens, invite Ellen to a dinner.⁹² Much to the dismay of the Mingotts, Ellen desires to obtain a divorce from her husband. The family requests that Newland, in his capacity as an attorney, talk her out of it so as to avoid public unpleasantness for the family. Although of a like opinion as the family, when he hears Mr. Letterblair, senior partner at Newland’s firm, rhetorically ask “why not let well enough alone,” Newland begins to recognize that the family’s opposition to divorce is “the Pharisaic voice of a society wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant.”⁹³ Yet, Newland, also wishing to avoid unpleasantness for himself, counsels Ellen from seeking a divorce in the interest of sacrificing individual desire to the collective good.

Newland finds himself increasingly attracted to Ellen and in an effort to push Ellen out of his life, he asks May to forego the customary long engagement as “foolish conventionalities.”⁹⁴ May is concerned that Newland may be hastening their marriage to expel thoughts of his former mistress, Mrs. Rushworth.⁹⁵ Suspecting that he may still

⁹¹ Wharton, *Innocence*, 20.

⁹² Mrs. Archer is very precise about the term aristocracy and remembers that it denotes class and rank. As descendents of the first Dutch governor of Manhattan and other French and British aristocratic families, the van der Luydens have rank. The families that newspapers called aristocratic were really descendents of Dutch and English merchants (41).

⁹³ Wharton, *Innocence*, 82.

⁹⁴ Wharton, *Innocence*, 126.

⁹⁵ The scene is from Newland’s perspective and Newland assumes Mary refers to Mrs. Rushworth, but it is not clear from what May says exactly whom she meant to imply. It is possible that May already suspected that Newland was attracted to Ellen.

love his mistress, May offers him freedom from their engagement. She reasons that she “couldn’t have [her] happiness made out of a wrong—an unfairness—to somebody else.”⁹⁶ Newland assures her that no such obligation remains between Mrs. Rushworth and himself and she agrees to hasten the marriage.

Soon after their marriage, Newland is disappointed in the narrowness of his wife’s interests in travel, art, and literature. He quickly loses interest in enlightening her and “revert[s] to all his old inherited ideas about marriage.”⁹⁷ Convinced that his future holds little for him, he finds that Ellen’s re-entry into his life provides an opportunity to pursue an affair with her. At first, Ellen refuses him and argues that “they should not break faith with the people who trusted them.”⁹⁸ Her resolve falters. Ellen agrees to meet with Newland once before returning to Paris, but then unexpectedly cancels. During the farewell banquet he and May host for Ellen, Newland realizes that everyone already thinks they are lovers and decides to follow her to Europe. After the banquet, May reveals to Newland that she is expecting their first child. May also reveals that although she had only been certain that morning of her pregnancy she had told Ellen two days prior of her pregnancy. Newland realizes that because May stretched the truth concerning her pregnancy to Ellen, Ellen broke off the rendezvous with him. In the epilogue, Newland stays with May, remains faithful, and they have three children. Urged by Theodore Roosevelt, Newland runs for and wins one term in the New York state legislature. He is not re-elected, but he does not return wholly to private life. Instead, he presides over the Metropolitan Museum of Art, engages in letter writing, and is

⁹⁶ Wharton, *Innocence*, 125.

⁹⁷ Wharton, *Innocence*, 162.

⁹⁸ Wharton, *Innocence*, 253.

considered a leading citizen. When his son Dallas and he travel to France, Newland has the opportunity to meet Ellen and speculates that now at the end of their lives since both of their spouses have died, they could be together. Newland, however, declines to see Ellen.

A number of scholars interpret the novel's ending as the triumph of social constraints over the individual. In a pithy article comparing the Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* to Martin Scorsese's film version, for example, Richard Grenier explores whether Wharton really was the upholder of traditional values as the Columbia trustees who awarded her the Pulitzer Prize in 1920 believed. When the Pulitzer jury selected Sinclair Lewis's unquestionably satirical *Main Street* for the award, the Columbia trustees deemed that the Lewis's work did not satisfy the award's qualifications—"the American novel published during the year which best presented the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest American manners and manhood."⁹⁹ Consequently, they overruled their jury to bestow the award upon *The Age of Innocence*. Grenier argues that contrary to the Columbia trustees' interpretation of the novel, while writing the novel Wharton was in the midst of "an overwhelming hostility toward almost everything American."¹⁰⁰ The Columbia trustees preferred *The Age of Innocence* for its supposed flattering depiction of old New York society and interpreted Newland Archer's decision to stay with May instead of following the woman he loved to Europe as honorable and morally appropriate. Believing Wharton skeptical of this decision,

⁹⁹ Quoted in Richard Grenier, "Society & Edith Wharton," *Commentary* (1993): 49.

¹⁰⁰ Grenier, "Society & Edith Wharton," 48.

however, Grenier concludes that “love never conquers all. Society’s moral conventions conquer all.”¹⁰¹

Pamela Knights suggests an interesting twist on how Wharton understands the relation between social tradition and the individual, arguing that Wharton comes down on the side of neither simply, but suggests “a delicate middle way.”¹⁰² Newland realizes that May’s socially constructed innocence has been for the sake of “male gratification.”¹⁰³ Disappointed in his marriage, Newland tries to leave May and escape society with Ellen to some new region where they can be together beyond social rules. Yet, as Knights argues, Newland’s attempt to get beyond social rules is self-destructive, because without New York society, Newland has no stable identity. Thus, Knights argues that for Wharton “without the shape, the social mold, there may be no self at all.”¹⁰⁴ Newland’s mistake, Knights maintains, is that while understood that society greatly shaped the individual, he was mistaken to believe a true self existed beyond social formation. Newland cannot leave New York to be with Ellen, because without New York, there is no Newland.

I agree with Knights that the *The Age of Innocence* offers “a delicate middle way” in its presentation of the conflict between the individual and social traditions. Wharton’s novel is not a tragic story about how society forces the individual to perform onerous social duty for the sake of the abstract social good at the expense of individual happiness.

¹⁰¹ Grenier, “Society & Edith Wharton,” 52.

¹⁰² Pamela Knights, “Forms of Disembodiment: The Social Subject in *The Age of Innocence*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Wharton*, ed. Millicent Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 41.

¹⁰³ Knights, “Forms of Disembodiment,” 31.

¹⁰⁴ Knights, “Forms of Disembodiment.” 21.

Nor is it an explanation of how the individual is the mere plaything of social forces. Instead, Wharton offers the possibility that social conventions serve the individual's interest toward the end of having a good life. Undine's desires are not constrained and so she flies from one husband to the next in search of an unrealistic notion of private happiness. In contrast, by staying with May, raising their children, and taking a part in his community, Newland's life gains wholeness and dignity that it would otherwise not have had. More importantly, Newland realizes that he could not live happily with Ellen if he had broken trust with his wife and family. Honesty and fidelity to those whom one loves forms a large part of individual well-being—even more so than simply getting what one wants. As a young man, Newland thought that his social relations existed to please himself and he did not foresee the ways his social obligations would lead him to forego his immediate desires. Through his duty to his family and society he learns to recognize how other people are not mere instruments of one's well-being who can be lied to or manipulated for one's well-being. In contrast to Undine, Newland learns that one's happiness is served by living honorably with others.

From the start, Wharton shows us that Newland is inclined to intellectual and artistic pursuits and honors society's public morality. Although Newland considers himself more cosmopolitan and enlightened than the individual male members of society, he concedes that as a group signifying "New York" collectively, he "accepted their doctrine on all the issues called moral."¹⁰⁵ His pretenses to cosmopolitanism conceal the extent to which he is truly conventional and allows him the false luxury of feeling above custom's constraints. As Wharton shows us, Newland is not as enlightened as he fancies

¹⁰⁵ Wharton, *Innocence*, 7.

and takes comfort in the familiar.¹⁰⁶ From Ellen's first appearance in the family opera box, Newland is unsettled by her tainted presence next to his future blameless bride. He is relieved at her absence at the betrothal breakfast at Catherine Mingott's residence. He feared how "the faint shadow that her unhappy past might seem to shed on their [May's and his] radiant future."¹⁰⁷ Newland is quite cognizant that the troubling thoughts he had concerning the practice of marriage "were due to the inopportune arrival of the Countess Olenska."¹⁰⁸ Although Newland concedes to using his engagement as an occasion for his family to champion the Countess Olenska in New York, he is annoyed at the prospect that her failed marriage and his spotless engagement have become intertwined. Wharton tells us that "in spite of the cosmopolitan views on which he prided himself, he thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker, and about to ally himself with one of his own kind."¹⁰⁹

Newland is genuinely interested in having a marriage in which the appearance of compatibility and friendship matches the true fond relationship between husband and wife. Like all the young men of his set, Newland fancies that under his tutelage, his innocently educated fiancée will blossom into his intellectual equal as his wife. However, young New York women were not brought up with a view to providing young New York men with intellectual equals and tender lifelong companions. Prior to his marriage, Newland muses on the difference of social customs governing his young, male adulthood and those that produced May Welland, who had not been permitted to enjoy, as

¹⁰⁶ See also Lloyd M. Daigrepoint's discussion of Newland's "naïve and pompous" unconventionality in "The Cult of Passion in *The Age of Innocence*," *American Literary Realism* 40 (2007): 3.

¹⁰⁷ Wharton, *Innocence*, 25.

¹⁰⁸ Wharton, *Innocence*, 39.

¹⁰⁹ Wharton, *Innocence*, 27.

he had, “the experiences, the versatility, and freedom of judgment.”¹¹⁰ Newland believes that the development of intelligence that he wished for in his wife depended upon his wife having similar experiences. Moreover, he realizes that aside from male vanity there was no justifiable reason “why his bride should not have been allowed the same freedom of experience as himself.”¹¹¹ The innocence young men desired of their brides encouraged not only sexual inexperience, but the educational underdevelopment of intellectual, moral and spiritual capacities in young women. By the time young New York women married, their capacities for intellectual and moral development are undermined by the customs that guide the education of women. Yet, it is precisely these intellectual and moral characteristics in a wife that Newland believes to be essential to the well-being of his marriage. Although Newland realizes this prior to his marriage, he refuses to believe that his marriage will be like other unsatisfactory marriages he witnesses.

After his marriage, Newland becomes disillusioned with his marriage and blames social forces for his unhappiness. He believes that his marriage to May was simply the culmination of social interests rather than practices constructed to encourage individual well-being. May and Newland’s engagement, as Wharton tells us, had been “long foreseen by watchful relatives, [and] had been carefully passed upon in family council.”¹¹² For the returning newlyweds, the Wellands found an appropriate modern house practically equipped with good plumbing that May decorated in a conventional fashion. Newland feels his life narrowing into customary routes and wonders where “his

¹¹⁰ Wharton, *Innocence*, 37.

¹¹¹ Wharton, *Innocence*, 39.

¹¹² Wharton, *Innocence*, 25.

real experiences were [to be] lived.”¹¹³ Newland comes to see himself as a victim of social mechanisms and processes so long in development and unstoppable with the steady velocity of the years that he believes that he has not really been the author of his most significant life decisions. Wharton shows us, however, the narrowing of Newland’s life is not due to severe social restraints, but the result of his own unreflective adherence to trendy cosmopolitanism and conventionalism.

As noted above, after his marriage, Newland believes that New York’s marriage customs encourage the alignment of social interests rather than the joining of compatible persons. In one very important respect, it is an exaggeration to say that New York custom did not serve the interest of the individual. One social custom had no other function than to encourage the marriage of compatible persons—the long engagement. Wharton shows us before his attraction to Ellen, Newland scoffing at the long engagement as old fashioned. Even before pressing May to hasten their marriage to avoid Ellen, Newland repeatedly indicates his desire for a shortened engagement.¹¹⁴ The purpose of the long engagement is to allow the betrothed the opportunity of becoming more familiar with each other and to prevent badly matched marriages. Mrs. Welland expresses this purpose when she says that “[w]e must give them time to get to know each other a little bit better.”¹¹⁵ Newland enjoys flippantly flouting convention when he asks May to hasten their marriage. When Newland finally succeeds in convincing May to hasten their marriage, his impulse is no longer to flout convention, but to escape his passion for Ellen in the security of convention.

¹¹³ Wharton, *Innocence*, 105.

¹¹⁴ See Wharton, *Innocence*, 25 and 56.

¹¹⁵ Wharton, *Innocence*, 26.

As Newland urges May to hasten their marriage, May responds with thoughtful consideration of their well-being with each other. Regardless of the social cost to herself, May offers to release him of their engagement, because she suspects (rightly) that his desire to marry quickly indicates an attempt to flee from another love. May unequivocally says that “I couldn’t have my happiness made out of a wrong—an unfairness—to someone else. . . . What sort of life could we build on such foundations?”¹¹⁶ Unlike Newland, May believes her decision concerning whom to marry is freely made and between equals. Moreover, consideration for the other’s happiness and honesty is the foundation upon which one’s happiness depends. Despite potential social disapproval, May is willing to break their engagement and experience unpleasantness herself for the sake of their mutual well-being and honesty. Newland briefly marvels at May’s bold pronouncement, but assures her that his only reason for hastening their marriage is to avoid “foolish conventionalities.”¹¹⁷ Yet, Newland’s decision to marry May represents his escape into convention and an unwillingness to defy opinion.

Thanks to the early announcement of May and Newland’s marriage and the van der Luydens’ august dinner party, Ellen is successfully reincorporated into the social body, but her family is not willing to support her if she seeks a divorce. Her family, Newland included, selfishly prefers to avoid public unpleasantness and temporary discomfort to themselves rather than to help Ellen seek legal freedom from her husband. The main risk, as Newland sees it, is that the rumors that Ellen had run off with her husband’s secretary might be publicly discussed. Regardless of whether the rumor is true, the talk would be enough to ruin Ellen and disgrace the family. Newland makes no

¹¹⁶ Wharton, *Innocence*, 125.

¹¹⁷ Wharton, *Innocence*, 126.

attempt to ask Ellen if the rumor is true and shies away from it so as not to have to confront its veracity. He tells her that her freedom is not worth “a lot of beastly talk,” because “one can’t make over society.”¹¹⁸ Motivated by his private desire to avoid knowing the truth behind Ellen’s escape, Newland blathers that “[t]he individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest.”¹¹⁹ As Wharton tells us, Newland reaches for “stock phrases” to avoid confronting the possible unpleasant truth that Ellen may have had an affair with her husband’s secretary.

Newland’s rationale that it is right that the individual sacrifice himself for the common good is echoed throughout society. Under the cover and protection of the apparently sacred mantel of the collective good, other individuals use the name of society for the sake of hiding themselves from unpleasant truths. They ignore the fact that there might be unhappy marriages or justifiable and forgivable reasons to flee one’s husband. From a distaste of personal discomfort and inconvenience, individuals invoke society’s collective interest for the greater good to hide the unpleasant and so allow their indifference to extract a great harm to individuals. The apparent outpouring of duty, compassion for her misfortune, and generosity on behalf of the best families—the Mingotts, Wellands, Archers, van der Luydens—for the sake of Ellen’s restoration to the social body evaporates even before her desire for a divorce is well-known.¹²⁰ Ellen pointedly remarks that “[t]he real loneliness is living among all these kind people who

¹¹⁸ Wharton, *Innocence*, 93.

¹¹⁹ Wharton, *Innocence*, 93.

¹²⁰ Mrs. Archer, Janey and the local gossip, Mr. Sillerton Jackson, mine Ellen’s past for evidence portending her unhappy marriage. They cite her unconventional childhood and wearing a black dress at her coming out party. Mrs. Archer writes off Ellen’s desire for a divorce as the act of “a wayward child” (121).

only ask one to pretend.”¹²¹ Society maintains a false appearance of well-being at the very real expense of curbing individuals from being able to talk about their misfortune, misery, and loneliness and receive the comforts of living in a society with strong families and tight communities.

Since Newland sees Ellen’s suffering as exotic, he becomes insensible to Ellen’s suffering that he could have helped relieve. The Countess Olenska had a “mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience.”¹²² She had “lived in an atmosphere so thick with drama” as if she had been “plucked out of a very maelstrom.”¹²³ Newland even comes to believe that her rumored affair with her husband’s secretary must be true, because it fits the story of a mistreated wife fleeing her cruel husband in the arms of a dashing rescuer. Newland prefers to see a fiction in her life than to find out the truth. Kathy Miller Hadley convincingly argues that by focusing on Newland’s point of view, Wharton ironically draws attention to Ellen’s and May’s “untold stories.”¹²⁴ The readers do not learn the particulars of Ellen’s unhappy marriage, her escape, and whether the Count’s accusation is true, because Newland is, at first, unwilling to ask directly, valuing her legal freedom less than the social unpleasantness a divorce case would stir. Secondly, as I add, caught up in this fantasy version of Ellen’s unhappy marriage, Newland fails to have true sympathy with her misfortune, and to realize the harms, misery and unhappiness she has fled. By coloring her misfortune with exotic hues, Newland is unwilling to confront honestly the unhappiness Ellen fled. Given

¹²¹ Wharton, *Innocence*, 64.

¹²² Wharton, *Innocence*, 96.

¹²³ Wharton, *Innocence*, 96.

¹²⁴ Kathy Miller Hadley, “Ironic Structure and Untold Stories in *The Age of Innocence*,” *Studies in the Novel* 23 (1991): 262.

Newland's rosy image of Ellen's life, it appears hard for him to imagine that she could have wanted to flee it. Unable to make Newland sensible to her suffering, Ellen is isolated and lonely. Newland does not value her freedom as highly as she or understand why she would leave behind so stimulating a social life in search for freedom.

Much of Newland's unhappiness is due to the fact that in old New York there is not much a respectable gentleman could do. Like Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country*, Newland is "at heart a dilettante" as every young man his age was cultivated to be.¹²⁵ It was unrespectable to go into business and so the law provided a profession for a gentleman under which lackluster ambition-less young men could while away the years with petty tasks and reading the newspaper. He was not encouraged to be hard-working, industrious or interested in public life. Newland "had always travelled as a sight-seer and looker-on."¹²⁶ He attends art exhibitions in a lame attempt to "keep up."¹²⁷ New Yorkers traveling abroad scrupulously avoided meeting with or talking with people in foreign countries. After his marriage, Newland realizes that "his artistic and intellectual life would go on, as it always had outside the domestic circle."¹²⁸ Yet, we see evidence of efforts to bring together society and intellectual activity that suggests that it is possible.¹²⁹ One of the characters in the novel, Professor Emerson Sillerton, who although from a very respectable family choose to become an archaeologist, married the equally respectable Amy Dagonet. Together they regularly enjoyed hosting outlandish guests

¹²⁵ Wharton, *Innocence*, 4.

¹²⁶ Wharton, *Innocence*, 163.

¹²⁷ Wharton, *Innocence*, 90.

¹²⁸ Wharton, *Innocence*, 163.

¹²⁹ It is noted that Catherine Mingott or Julius Beaufort could have brought about a "fusion" of art and society if they had had interest (85).

and traveling to unusual places in the world. The Sillertons' habits and company appear incomprehensible, but their eccentricities are tolerated.¹³⁰ Newland does not at all see the Sillertons as a potential model for his own marriage. Newland prefers an abstracted membership and inclusion in artistic and literary circles by passively viewing and reading. Newland orders copious books from London that cover many subjects including works by Herbert Spencer, Alphonse Daudet, George Elliot, and works of history. He even stops reading poetry and literature aloud to May, because he did not enjoy hearing her air her opinions as opposed to the ones he used to feed her.¹³¹ The sight of his literary friend's small house leads Newland to wonder "if the humanities were so meanly housed in other capitals."¹³² He regrets, but accepts that artistic and social circles do not overlap in New York, and is unwilling to take a vested interest or lead in society to incorporate literary company.

Newland's literary friend, Ned Winsett, a writer turned journalist for a woman's magazine, tells Newland that he ought "to go into politics" or to emigrate.¹³³ Unlike Newland, Ned recognizes that Newland could achieve much for the sake of his city. Ned sees Newland's social station as an advantage and opportunity that ought not to be squandered in resigned idleness. According to Ned, Newland either ought to be active in the public sphere or to move away, presumably to Europe. Newland waves aside Ned's suggestion as a signal of "the unbridgeable difference between men like Ned Winsett and

¹³⁰ See Carol J. Singely's discussion of Professor Sillerton as a model for Newland in "Bourdieu, Wharton, and Changing Culture in *The Age of Innocence*," *Cultural Studies* 17 (2003): 511-12.

¹³¹ See Wharton, *Innocence*, 245.

¹³² Wharton, *Innocence*, 56.

¹³³ Wharton, *Innocence*, 103.

the others—Archer’s kind.”¹³⁴ Public life was customarily frowned upon among New York society. Newland accepts this point uncritically and duly shows contempt for active life. It was not considered respectable for gentlemen to enter into political life where one might be soiled in the “muck.”¹³⁵ As he saw it, the country was “in possession of the bosses and the emigrant, and the decent people had to fall back on sport or culture.”¹³⁶ Newland rejects going into politics or emigrating as unthinkable for a man of his position. Ned chides Newland for claiming to contribute to culture and points out that Newland’s class represents the last links between old world culture and the new world and that they are allowing the former to wither and die. After this conversation, the next chapter demonstrates exactly how little New York’s best contributes to culture and how trivial their activities have become. At the Reggie Chiverses’s country house, New York’s finest engage in trite romantic conversation, practical jokes such as placing goldfish in the beds of unsuspecting sleeping guests, or pretending to be burglars to scare old aunts, and pillow fights.

Newland looks for some way to free himself of the drudgery of his conventional life and marriage, but he does not know what to do. Usually among New York gentleman, should the husband become bored with or disappointed in his wife’s limitations, he is free to pursue extra-marital affairs. In New York, affairs are conducted along conventional lines that require the usual “game of precautions and prevarications, concealments and compliances.”¹³⁷ Affairs are much like the games played at the Reggie

¹³⁴ Wharton, *Innocence*, 104.

¹³⁵ Wharton, *Innocence*, 104.

¹³⁶ Wharton, *Innocence*, 104.

¹³⁷ Wharton, *Innocence*, 253.

Chiveres' country house. Larry Lefferts, the "high-priest of form," has conducted many affairs while maintaining the perfect form of a happy marriage.¹³⁸ Lefferts has successfully conditioned his wife that she is oblivious to her husband's extra-marital affairs. Provided that a married man takes the proper precautions, he may reasonably expect his fellow gentlemen to help him maintain decorum, good form, and an unsuspecting wife. Ignorance of wives and hypocrisy of husbands maintains the superficial pleasant appearance of New York marriages.

Newland decides upon the most conventional of options—an affair—instead of taking either of Ned Winsett's suggestions. An affair with Ellen, who appears exotic and unconventional, promises to bring drama and excitement to Newland's life. Yet, he also realizes the conventionality of an affair and is even sickened by the ease with which affairs are conducted with the unofficial approval of society and the deception it requires. Since society poses no objection to having an affair, the only other obstacle poses comes from Newland's sense of morality. Newland thinks Larry Lefferts' easy affairs are contemptible, but says to himself: "But to love Ellen Olenska was not to become a man like Lefferts."¹³⁹ With this thought, Newland confronts "the dread argument of the individual case."¹⁴⁰ The fallacy of the individual case is that Newland believes that Ellen's and his situation is uniquely different from other individuals and so "they were answerable to no tribunal but that of their own judgment."¹⁴¹ Newland believes that they are unlike any other pair of individuals attracted to each other but unable to be together

¹³⁸ Wharton, *Innocence*, 37.

¹³⁹ Wharton, *Innocence*, 254.

¹⁴⁰ Wharton, *Innocence*, 254.

¹⁴¹ Wharton, *Innocence*, 254.

and so moral rules do not apply to them. Having disposed of moral arguments against having affair, Newland struggles to redefine it in terms more fitting to their (supposedly) unique situation and to find a way to have an affair and transcend those conventional categories of unfaithful husband and kept mistress. Although Newland tries to justify an affair so that it is not a deception, Ellen is not fooled. She tells him to look “not at visions, but at realities” and bluntly asks if he means for her to be his mistress.¹⁴²

Newland is uncomfortable with the word mistress and tells her that he wants “to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won’t exist” and where they can be two human beings in love.¹⁴³ Newland lives up to his name in his quest to make his passion for Ellen into a search for a new country. Ellen disparages the idea of finding such a country and tells him that people have tried and found that “it wasn’t at all different from the old world they’d left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous.”¹⁴⁴ There is no new country to be found where an affair is not a deception and nowhere to flee where they can escape their betrayal.

Ellen knows that Newland and she cannot be “happy behind the backs of the people who trust them.”¹⁴⁵ Newland tries to make their love for each other into an exception to morality, but Ellen insists that “morality is superiority to romantic self-fulfillment.”¹⁴⁶ Ellen explains to Newland that she must leave New York so that she does

¹⁴² Wharton, *Innocence*, 240.

¹⁴³ Wharton, *Innocence*, 241.

¹⁴⁴ Wharton, *Innocence*, 241.

¹⁴⁵ Wharton, *Innocence*, 241. It is not obvious that consummation of their love would have brought either Newland or Ellen happiness. In multiple drafts of the novel, Wharton explored the possibility of Newland and Ellen having an affair, but in every draft, their affair ended unhappily. See Hadley, 262-63.

¹⁴⁶ Sarah Kozloff, “Complicity in *The Age of Innocence*,” *Style* 35 (2001): 284.

not “lie to the people who’ve been good to me.”¹⁴⁷ Ellen remembers how the family rallied around her when she came back to New York. For their kindness to her then, Ellen does not want to deceive them even for the sake of being with the person she loves. It is a great wrong to break faith with those people they care most about—their family, friends, and neighbors—because the individual good is partially based on keeping faith with those whom we care about.¹⁴⁸ Wharton is critical of the pursuit of happiness, which may be used to justify all individual acts of dishonesty and betrayal so long as the individual can claim that he did it in the name of happiness. The individual’s good can be served through only living morally with others. Ellen’s concept of morality is more sophisticated than society’s, which is concerned solely with maintaining the formal appearance of morality.

In Newland’s case, deceiving May requires great self-deception on his part. Newland’s quest for self-fulfillment is his self-deception and devaluation of his wife. Since May is not the moldable wife that he wanted, he is disappointed in her and, consequently, is often surprised by her flashes of independence. Indeed, it may be that Newland was attracted to Ellen precisely because she appeared more vulnerable and in need of a male protector whereas May is strikingly capable and assured. For example, consider May’s excellence at archery—she hits the target. May surprised him when she told him that she would free him from their engagement if he loved someone else. Newland regarded her independence of thought as a onetime event that exhausted her

¹⁴⁷ Wharton, *Innocence*, 259.

¹⁴⁸ It should be observed nowhere it is suggested that Newland’s obligation to Mary arose from their wedding vows—that he ought to be faithful because he vowed to be so. The problem with basing honesty on wedding vows is that only Newland would be obliged and Ellen would not be. Wharton’s point is to expand honesty to a broader social context. The obligations of honesty do not depend on formal vows, promises, or contracts.

intellectual powers. Newland sees in May “innocence [that] was as moving as the trustful clasp of a child” and believes that she must be protected.¹⁴⁹ Less kindly, he imagines that “she would probably go through life dealing to the best of her ability with each experience as it came, but never anticipating any by so much as a stolen glance.”¹⁵⁰ This near bestial evaluation of May’s lack of inner life is most uncharitable and also prevents Newland from recognizing how much his wife understands.

May is not nearly as naïve as Newland supposes her.¹⁵¹ May knew about Newland’s pre-marital affair despite her parent’s attempt to shield her knowing. In addition, unlike Larry Leffert’s wife in the case of her husband, May suspects that Newland may be having an affair with Ellen. May proves most adept, even cunning, at separating Newland from his would-be lover, Ellen. Suspecting that she may be pregnant, May confides to Ellen that she is pregnant. Consequently, Ellen breaks off her rendezvous with Newland. Only after Ellen’s farewell banquet does May reveal to Newland that she is (definitely) pregnant. Not only has May fibbed to Ellen, she lets Newland see that she has done so. Newland stays with May and takes up his responsibility to be a father. Not until after May dies and Newland and his adult son, Dallas, travel to France does he finally realize his wife’s sympathy for him. Dallas tells his father that just before his mother died, she told him that she knew Newland would always be there for their children “because once, when she asked you to, you’d given up

¹⁴⁹ Wharton, *Innocence*, 266.

¹⁵⁰ Wharton, *Innocence*, 156. Looking at May’s face, Newland imagines that “he would always know the thoughts behind it, that never, in all the years to come, would she surprise him by an unexpected mood, by a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty or an emotion. She had spent her poetry and romance on their short courting: the function was exhausted because the need was past” (245).

¹⁵¹ See Hadley, 268-69 for a description of May as a capable and empowered figure instead of the helpless innocent Newland imagines her to be.

the thing you most wanted.”¹⁵² The revelation that “some one had guessed and pitied” him for sacrificing his love for Ellen and that it was his wife moves Newland deeply.¹⁵³ Newland realizes the extent of his wife’s sympathetic regard for him and even that he had enjoyed the marriage of tender companionship he had, in his youth, so greatly desired.

The novel’s final chapter shows Newland twenty-six years later in his library where “most of the real things of his life had happened” including May’s announced pregnancy, his eldest son’s christening and first baby steps, and his daughter’s engagement.¹⁵⁴ Newland who feared nothing would happen to him found that life with May presented many real events. Newland has developed from a dilettante into a liberated gentleman. Newland had scoffed at Ned Winsett’s suggestion to enter politics, but at Theodore Roosevelt’s prompting, Newland runs for and wins a year in the State Assembly. Ned Winsett could not persuade Newland with his proposition either to go into politics or to take leave entirely of the United States and emigrate. It took a gentleman of spirit and leadership to inspire Newland to be a man of leadership and innovation himself. He is not re-elected, but he does not disappear from the public stage and continues to take an active role through civic engagement.

Through Newland, Wharton chronicles “gentleman emancipation.” Newland moves from being an on-looker of life to a participant. As Michael Nowlin observes, that instead of becoming a relic in the old museum, Newland “presid[es] over the expansion of a world-class museum”—the Metropolitan Museum.¹⁵⁵ Newland manages an

¹⁵² Wharton, *Innocence*, 296.

¹⁵³ Wharton, *Innocence*, 296.

¹⁵⁴ Wharton, *Innocence*, 287.

¹⁵⁵ Michael Nowlin, “Edith Wharton’s Higher Provincialism: *French Ways* for Americans and the Ends of *The Age of Innocence*,” *Journal of American Studies* 38 (2004): 92.

impressive feat as an active preserver of the past. The curious fact of old New York was that it prevented gentlemen from being active in society—society more broadly conceived than just New York's best families, but the whole of the city. Newland notes that young men “were emancipating themselves” from the traditional occupations and freely pursuing politics, archaeology, architecture, “landscape-engineering,” and historical preservation.¹⁵⁶ It becomes decent for young men to be interested in politics, be educated in the sciences, and have occupations outside of law and business. Although Newland favored the fine arts, the younger generation of Americans favors the practical fusions of art and life. Like his father, Dallas enjoys art, but he incorporates that interest into his occupation as an architect. In his youth, Newland had all sorts of stunted desires and interests. He had been just an on-looker with regard to traveling, art, theatre and books. Looking back, Newland considers the limited horizons in which he had expected to languish, and finds that “his small contribution to the new state of things seemed to count.”¹⁵⁷ Newland is proud of his life.

Conclusion

It is easy for us to see that Undine's desires for base pleasure, material goods, and status will lead to unhappiness. That her pursuit of happiness will end badly we have little doubt. In contrast, in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton presents Newland who is a more attractive and sympathetic figure struggling to find happiness within society's expectations. May appears dull and conventional and Ellen appears to be a much better intellectual and emotional match for Newland. Newland appears to be in the right—he

¹⁵⁶ Wharton, *Innocence*, 287.

¹⁵⁷ Wharton, *Innocence*, 288.

wants a tender and compatible spouse and places much emphasis on having such a spouse for his happiness. Why should his youthful mistake—his marriage to May—mar his whole life? If his marriage fails to give him the happiness he desires, then is he justified in seeking a more promising companion? Yet, as Wharton shows us, Newland has just as mistaken a notion of happiness as Undine. Undine divorces to upgrade her material circumstances and Newland considers leaving his wife, his family, friends, and country to be with Ellen. It is likely that if Newland had abandoned May for Ellen, their affair would have fizzled, and eventually they would have sought alternative lovers. If so, Newland's life would have resembled Undine's life and her string of husbands. Instead, Newland accepts his responsibility—as husband and father and accepts a role as a leader of society. In so doing, Newland finds that he really begins to live his life—the “real” events of his life that happen in his library as opposed to his dreams of being with Ellen. Newland does not gain the kind of happiness he imagined, but the happiness he has is real and he is proud of it. The pursuit of happiness does not justify breaking trust, because it is through living morally with others that our own lives gain wholeness and in which contentment is possible. Put above every consideration, the vain pursuit of happiness would have led Newland away from the things that give him real lifelong satisfaction.

In contrast to Tom Wolfe and Percy, Edith Wharton more forcefully demonstrates the individual's obligation to society to live morally above pursuing happiness. Newland and even Undine live in structured social orders, and, in Newland's case, Wharton shows how society helps to guide the individual to living well. In disagreement with Wharton, Wolfe disapproves of structured societies precisely because he suspects society's guidance to be misleading and to encourage individuals to pursue false goods. Wolfe

argues that the United States's strength is as a decentralized society in which individuals, if they have the fortitude, may leave one social group for another group. Like Wolfe, Walker Percy little regrets the passing of traditional society, but he is more ambivalent than Wolfe about the benefits of "rootedness" of traditional society. Whereas Wolfe objects to traditional society in principle, much of Percy's rejection of the Southern way of life is based on his critique of Southern stoicism. Percy depicts communities favorably—although he focuses more on the self's realizing itself as a searcher and finding a fellow searcher as the key to living well. Moreover, in contrast to Wolfe, Percy identifies scientific attempts to overcome unhappiness to be a greater threat to living well than the social pressure on the individual that Wolfe criticizes. In response, Wharton might reply that Wolfe's decentralized society and Percy's community of searchers who live with their discontent aggravate how the pursuit of happiness leads individual astray to look outside the social contexts and obligations that she thinks best provides individuals with satisfying lives. For Wharton, opting out of society and living aside from society is unmanly and a neglect of one's responsibility to seek preservation of society and its reform.

For Wharton, the happiness does not come as a result of the unalloyed satisfaction of desire that individuals seek. The right to pursuit of happiness persuades individuals to seek contentment outside of social life and justifies their destructive actions in overcoming the social constraints that nurture the order and continuity necessary for living well. As Undine's example shows us, her quest for self-gratification prevents her from knowing and enjoying the things that she gains. Individual life cannot be meaningful or even lived well apart from social life. Chasing after happiness harms what chance individuals have of a good life. At the prospect of becoming a father, Newland

learns to accept his responsibility and to care for his children as part of his good life—a lesson that Undine fails to learn with the birth of her son.

According to Wharton, whatever existence is to be had outside of society—outside of the bonds of human trust and social restraint—cannot be happy. Morality is antecedent to the pursuit of happiness. Without honesty to others and responsibility to our families and societies little can come of our pursuit of happiness. Our social relationships bind us to one other and give our lives wholeness and stable identities that we need to have any measure of satisfaction in our lives. Undine Spragg tries to restrain her desires, but the individual's resources are too impoverished without society's support. Likewise, Newland and Ellen know that their affair is wrong and a betrayal of trust, but their mutual desire overtakes their resolve and they plan a tryst. May's intervention reminds Newland and Ellen of a social responsibility greater than themselves—the obligation the present generation has for the care of the future generation.

Wharton should not be thought to claim that the individual must subsume himself to the claims of society and the greater good at the expense of individual happiness. Individuals are parts of social wholes, and each part may be made into a whole by keeping faith and trust with those whom they share their lives. Yet, Wharton downplays individual happiness—regarding it as always suspect—in the clash between the individual and society. To see a robust depiction of the struggle of the individual and society in which the human heart is given its full weight, I will turn to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hawthorne on Friendship and Happiness

More than Wolfe, Percy, and Wharton, Nathaniel Hawthorne recognizes that the difficulties that individuals face in the pursuit of happiness originate not exclusively from the founding era, but from the earliest colonial times. Hawthorne compares the Puritan founding with his contemporary time to emphasize that the purpose of communities is to protect the mystery of the individual's heart as the foundation of liberty and happiness. Treating the private and hidden with suspicion, the Puritans intrusively seek to make the individual's inner life transparent for the sake of achieving an ideal society. The Puritans violate Hester Prynne's heart by compelling her to wear an external sign of her sin, the badge of the scarlet letter, which isolates her from society. If the Puritans practiced excessive social intrusion into individual lives, Hawthorne's contemporary society as depicted in "The Custom-House" sketch that introduces the main story of *The Scarlet Letter* depicts the deficiency in which individuals enjoy little community with each other. Bonds of self-interest are too weak to promote the kind of society in which individuals may enjoy the dual blessings of community and individual liberty. In the absence of stronger bonds than self-interest, Hawthorne fears the United States will come to resemble the decaying and isolated society of the Salem Custom-House where individuals, so well supported by the federal government, take little interest in each other. Either error leads to individual isolation, helplessness, and unhappiness. Both societies, Hawthorne argues, fail to recognize that the heart's mystery provides the basis of our

moral and political freedom, because the inner self remains incompletely known and partially veiled from others. Political health is served by acknowledging the sacredness of the human heart and limiting the reach of society, but also encouraging individuals to freely form private relationships and friendships to mediate the individual's relationship to society as a whole.

Hawthorne introduces friendship as a major theme of *The Scarlet Letter* through the Custom-House sketch in which he begins by discussing the relationship between author and reader as a kind of friendship. Through his discussion of friendship between author and reader, Hawthorne poses the reader to see that the Puritans and the Custom-House communities fail to recognize the mystery of the individual and how it must be shared with others for the sake of living well and happily in society. On the one hand, the Puritan community erred by trying to make every heart visible to society, and on the other, the denizens of the Custom-House live isolated and distant lives. Both societies discourage the personal friendships that Hawthorne believes are needed to live well and are essential for maintaining a free society. Through *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne shows that it is beyond the right of society to make the individual's heart visible, but that the individual's good depends on partially sharing the mystery of his heart with others. It is easy to see that the Puritans violate the heart by trying to expose it entirely to society's view, but Hawthorne recognizes that now America faces a greater danger in which individuals are too independent and shielded from each other such that they risk missing out on freely forming these relationships with each other. Sharing the heart poses the risk of loss of freedom, but the individuals must be inclined to share their hearts and lives with others heart for the enjoyment of common social goods and also the good of the

individual. This requires a delicate balance of both revealing and leaving hidden aspects of the heart. The pursuit of happiness cannot be pursued independently of others, but only by seeking friendships with others. Through his discussion of friendship and the veiled inner self, Hawthorne seeks to become the reader's friend, and, in so doing, he teaches his readers how to befriend another. The relationship between Hawthorne and his readers serves as a standard in *The Scarlet Letter* by which we might judge both the Puritan society described in the tale as well as the Custom-House.

In order to develop Hawthorne's argument for friendship, I will briefly discuss how Hawthorne's autobiographical moments in his sketches "The Old Manse" and "The Custom-House" are gestures and models of friendship toward the reader. Then, I will turn to how juxtaposing the sketches and main story of *The Scarlet Letter* helps illustrate how the Puritan community's violation of the heart and the Custom-House's extreme individualism both render individuals lonely and unhappy. Hawthorne criticizes his own society for narrowing human life by failing to direct human beings beyond their private selves and, as a consequence, causing increasingly brutish individual and social behavior. Finally, we will see how Hawthorne presents friendship as a correction of these societies.

The Autographical Impulse

Hawthorne's frequent autobiographical sketches and direct appeals to the reader have been of periodic interest to scholars.¹ While some scholars have focused on what

¹ See, for example, Amy Louise Reed, "Self-portraiture in the Work of Nathaniel Hawthorne," *Studies in Philology* 23 (1926): 40-54; Harry C. West, "Hawthorne's Editorial Pose," *American Literature* 4 (1972): 208-21; Mary Gosselink De Jong, "The Making of a 'Gentle Reader': Narrator and Reader in Hawthorne's Romances," *Studies in the Novel* 16 (1984): 359-77; Eric Savoy, "'Filial Duty': Rereading the Patriarchal Body in 'The Custom House,'" *Studies in the Novel* 25 (1993): 397-417; Dan McCall, "The Design of Hawthorne's 'Custom-House,'" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 21 (1967): 349-58; Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "Ambiguity and the Narrator in *The Scarlet Letter*," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 5 (1975):

these moments reveal about Hawthorne, others have emphasized how speaking to the reader directly serves to establish a relationship with the reader. These scholars see how Hawthorne puts himself and the reader on a common ground from which to view the story, but do not, as I will, argue that Hawthorne seeks to become the reader's friend. Harry C. West considers Hawthorne's editorial posturing as a fairly typical literary device within the gothic romance tradition to gain the reader's trust to accept the fantastic or morally suspect (such as adultery) elements of the story. As editor, Hawthorne appears neutral to the story's factual claims and so gains greater "latitude" to focus on what the story's events and symbols reveal about the heart.² While West rightly sees Hawthorne's editorial posturing as a common device in the genre to gain the reader's trust, he misses how in "The Old Manse" and "The Custom-House" Hawthorne appeals to the reader as friend. However, Hawthorne's appeals to the reader serve to encourage a more rich and multi-layer relationship with the reader than West supposes.

Mary Gosselink De Jong presents a more nuanced analysis of Hawthorne's narrative style. De Jong argues that his authorial narrations are designed to create the right kind of audience—a 'gentle reader'—for his romances and to "establish a common ground with his reader, and create the impression of a dialogue with him."³ Although Hawthorne's narrators resemble other 19th century omniscient narrators that guide and direct the reader through the text, Hawthorne's narrators, nevertheless, stand out.

147-63; Paul John Eakin, "Hawthorne's Imagination and the Structure of 'The Custom-House,'" *American Literature* 43 (1971): 346-58; Carlanda Green, "The Custom-House: Hawthorne's Dark Wood of Error," *The New England Quarterly* 53 (1980): 184-95; James M. Cox, "The Scarlet Letter: Through The Old Manse and The Custom House," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 51 (1975): 432-47 .

² West, 208.

³ De Jong, 359.

Hawthorne's narrators do not gain the reader's trust by assuming "intellectual or moral authority" but join the reader as a fellow "romancer" who "search[es] for understanding" the story.⁴ Like West, De Jong notes how Hawthorne distances himself from the factual claims of his story for the sake of presenting a "narrator with limited knowledge."⁵ However, De Jong emphasizes how Hawthorne gives the reader "responsibility" for choosing among the differing factual claims he presents and so brings the reader alongside himself as a "co-interpreter" of the story.⁶ Hawthorne inserts ambiguity and room for disagreement and variation in the interpretation of his stories for the sake of encouraging the reader to see that the characters in the story are "too complex to be fully known," and so that, furthermore, the reader will "respect their privacy."⁷

By granting the reader limited access to his character's inner lives, Hawthorne uses authorial appeals to unite author and reader in a common activity so as to teach the reader how to approach and respect the individual heart's secret and mysterious nature. Despite realizing the more complex relationship for which Hawthorne aims between author and reader, De Jong, like West, does not consider seriously Hawthorne's discussion of friendship between author and reader. Instead, De Jong keeps Hawthorne at a distance from truly speaking to the reader by consistently referring to the narrators of his stories speaking to the reader rather than Hawthorne himself. Citing Hawthorne's claim in "The Custom-House" to keep himself hidden from view, De Jong argues that

⁴ De Jong, 359 and 360.

⁵ De Jong, 368.

⁶ De Jong, 361 and 371.

⁷ De Jong, 368.

Hawthorne deflects his readers' interest in himself by redirecting them to consider their shared experiences as contemporary Americans and human beings.⁸ I agree that Hawthorne certainly wishes to avoid the reader becoming preoccupied with his autobiographical details. Hawthorne, however, does not remain fully concealed from view, but only the "inmost Me" remains hidden.

In the Custom-House sketch, Hawthorne provides guidance on an author's autobiographical impulse and observes that "when he casts his leaves forth upon the wind, the author addresses, not the many...,but the few who will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates and lifemates."⁹ Although Hawthorne seeks friends who will understand him through his writing, he knows they will not be the closest of friends and he clarifies that he shall keep "the inmost Me behind its veil."¹⁰ He contrasts himself with other authors who divulge so much of themselves that they seem to be writing for the "one heart and mind of perfect sympathy."¹¹ In effect, such authors write only for themselves and not to seek friends. Friends are sympathetic hearts and likeminded, but not identical souls. Moreover, Hawthorne warns against revealing too much of the self. Self-revelatory authors expose themselves almost indecently to the public, because the public sees more than that to which it has a right and the author violates himself through public exposure. In short, the author misunderstands the nature of friendship itself and also the particular character of friendship between an author and a reader. For

⁸ See De Jong, 372.

⁹Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 3.

¹⁰ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 4.

¹¹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 3.

Hawthorne, the kind of friendship self-revelatory authors seek with the public is not possible. The public cannot reciprocate friendship to the author and the author remains as friendless as before he wrote, but having sufficiently devalued the sacredness of his own heart, now stands defenseless.

Foremost, Hawthorne stresses the importance of how the author must respect the sacredness of his own heart and that of his readers'. The heart, as Hawthorne understands it, is something mysterious, personal, and special that should not be lightly revealed or easily known. Not only are there limits to society's gaze, but individuals must also respect certain limits and honor certain procedures for approaching the heart of another equally mysterious being. By his example and through his stories, Hawthorne shows how an author befriends a reader and shares himself cautiously, slowly, and partially for the sake of preserving the reader and his inner freedom.

As I shall argue more fully below, the message of *The Scarlet Letter* is incomplete if Hawthorne's Custom-House sketch and his relationship to the reader as a friend is left unexplored. The political import of Hester's story and her badge of shame is that societies as well as individuals must learn to respect the privacy, to use De Jong's term, of the human heart. In their utopian zeal for moral rectitude, the Puritans go too far in their punishment of Hester to make her secret sin transparent to public scrutiny, but fail entirely to make Hester repent. Society lacks the right to expose completely the heart and rob it of its mystery, and its ineffectual and clumsy mechanisms and methods further demonstrate its lack of right. The attempt to do so, however, causes much harm and damage to the heart as the example of the scarlet letter's failure to reform Hester shows. The need for political and social privacy is an easy lesson of *The Scarlet Letter*. But, as

Hawthorne shows in the Custom-House sketch, privacy of the heart and the individual as protected through our nation's doctrine of individual rights can create a deadening cocoon of privacy that renders individual lives too distant, isolated, and unhappy. Consequently, Hawthorne's argument for friendship is important for the sake of avoiding the fate of the Custom-House's independent and utterly private inhabitants. By befriending the reader, Hawthorne shows the reader how friends share their inner selves with each other, but that the revelation is partial. Knowledge of another's heart—even among friends—must always be incomplete.

“*The Old Manse*”

There is much textual support for linking together “The Old Manse” to “The Custom-House” like toy magnetic railcars.¹² “The Old Manse” introduces a collection of tales and sketches in *Mosses from an Old Manse* that was written while the Hawthornes lived at the Old Manse and published in 1846 just after Hawthorne left Concord and took his post at the Salem Custom House.¹³ In fact, at the end of “The Old Manse,” Hawthorne

¹² Some scholars also recognize much reason to link the two texts together. James M. Cox makes the case that “The Custom-House” is a sequel to “The Old Manse” in “The Scarlet Letter: Through The Old Manse and The Custom House,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 51 (1975): 440. Roberta F. Weldon observes that “parallels in narrative voice, tone, motifs, and themes” serve to link the two sketches in “From ‘The Old Manse’ to ‘The Custom-House’: The Growth of the Artist’s Mind,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 20 (1978): 36.

¹³ Scholars disagree on whether the stories and sketches in *Mosses from an Old Manse* are thematically unified. See Stephen Adams, “Unifying Structures in Mosses from an Old Manse,” *Studies in American Fiction* 8 (1980): 147-63, Cox, “The Scarlet Letter: Through the Old Manse and the Custom House,” 436, and John J. McDonald, “‘The Old Manse’ and Its Mosses: The Inception and Development of Mosses from an Old Manse,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 16 (1974): 77-108. Cox argues that the tales and sketches in *Mosses*, absent the “The Old Manse” introduction could have been added on to Hawthorne’s first collection, *Twice-Told Tales*. In contrast, Adams and McDonald argue, in different ways, for *Mosses*’s thematic unity. Adams argues that “The Old Manse” introduces the dominant theme of “the quest for a new Eden” that “links the major images and themes of *Mosses*” together (147 and 148). John J. McDonald contends that the unity Hawthorne saw in the tales arose from the tone of the place in which they were written and that the tales themselves enjoy little thematic unity.

mentions his new post at the custom-house.¹⁴ At the beginning of “The Custom-House,” Hawthorne first observes that despite his usual modesty, he has ventured twice to share images of his life with the reader and specifically mentions that the prior occasion was the “description of [his] way of life in the deep quietude of an Old Manse.”¹⁵ Secondly, Hawthorne references the Old Manse on five additional occasions in the Custom House sketch both to draw contrast between the two places and also to reinforce shared themes in two sketches.¹⁶ Given his care to bind these two works together, it is reasonable to begin with “The Old Manse” for the insight into Hawthorne’s understanding of autobiography and the relation it forms between author and reader.

The full title of the sketch is “The Old Manse: The Author Makes the Reader Acquainted with His Abode.” The sketch’s title promises a virtual visit to the author’s residence, but Hawthorne delays the anticipated event of entering his study so as to slowly acquaint the reader with himself and introduce the reader to his “circle of friends.”¹⁷ The sketch is an exercise in delaying the gratification of the reader—the reader gains entry into the Old Manse’s study only in the final paragraph. At which point, Hawthorne treats his reader with greater familiarity and invites the reader to sit down and make himself comfortable. In this way, Hawthorne suggests that through similar metaphorical degrees, detours, digressions and pauses that he employs to delay

¹⁴ Hawthorne observes that “Providence took me by the hand, and—an oddity of dispensation which, I trust, there is no irreverence in smiling at—has led me...from the Old Manse into a custom house” in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 26.

¹⁵ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 3.

¹⁶ See pages 7, 11, 32, 38, and 39 for explicit references to the Old Manse.

¹⁷ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 27.

the reader's access to his study, so should individuals slowly approach one another in friendship. After a quick summary of the sketch, I will discuss the contrast Hawthorne draws between how Emerson and he investigate the individual through their writings and how their different approaches influences their readers. Hawthorne's indirect and meandering tour and treasure hunt at the Old Manse is an intentional departure from Emerson's more direct approach. By looking unmediated at the individual self, Emerson encourages his follower to treat him as a source of truth that can be plumbed for hidden treasure. In contrast, Hawthorne turns his readers away from looking into himself—in fact, he brags about how little he reveals to the reader. Instead, Hawthorne directs the reader outward and invites the reader on a treasure hunt to look for new material for Hawthorne to base a novel. Hawthorne and the reader come up empty handed on material for a novel. But the treasure seeking itself turns out to have been the real treasure. In the process, Hawthorne cultivates friendship based on mutual respect and awareness of the other's inner mystery that must be cautiously approached and partially revealed so as to preserve the right and dignity of the other person.

Throughout *The Old Manse*, Hawthorne's various pretenses and excuses to delay going into the Old Manse become comical. He sets up the reader to desire to go immediately to his study—the heart of the house—by telling the reader about his “most delightful little nook of a study.” The reader may suppose that the first stop on the tour will be the study, but Hawthorne postpones taking the reader into his study by claiming that as a guest the reader “is entitled to all courtesy in the way of sightshowing” and takes the reader, treating him almost like tourist, to see the Concord River and then a nearby

battleground.¹⁸ Suddenly as though lost in a reverie about the land's original Indian inhabitants, Hawthorne exclaims that “[w]e had almost forgotten [the Old Manse]” and promises to take the reader back to the Old Manse, but through the orchard first. After seeing the orchard, Hawthorne takes the reader to the vegetable garden and speaks at length about the delights of seeing his “vegetable progeny.”¹⁹ He remarks that after seeing all these sights “the reader begins to despair of finding his way back into the Old Manse.”²⁰

But Hawthorne does not yet take the reader to his house. Instead, he delays and says that since the weather is so fine, being outdoors is “the truest hospitality.”²¹ Despite having remarked on the fineness of the weather, Hawthorne tells the reader about one rainy day in which he search through old papers stored in the Old Manse's garret (the attic). Through this recollection Hawthorne reveals to the reader that he seeks treasure at the Old Manse—material upon which to base a work. The reader is now a co-treasure seeker. However, Hawthorne finds nothing inspiring among the dusty old books and papers. Hawthorne recalls a sunny day in which his friend, Ellery Channing, and he go fishing. At first, the outing on the river and along its bank holds greater promise of “lav[ing] the interior regions of the poet's imagination.”²² Friendly conversation profited both “not in any definite idea, not in any angular or rounded truth” but in freedom from

¹⁸ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 5.

¹⁹ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 11.

²⁰ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 12.

²¹ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 12.

²² Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 17.

convention.²³ Hawthorne claims to return gladly to the Old Manse, a symbol of artifice and convention, but also of hearth and home.

Hawthorne excuses himself from “babbling” so long and delaying going into the study—yet he digresses once more to tell the reader that as he writes this sketch he has left the Old Manse for a custom house.²⁴ Through this digression, Hawthorne makes it clear that even the happiness he knew at the Old Manse was limited in duration and qualified. It was limited because his family and he depart from the sweet surroundings of the Old Manse for Salem. More importantly, though, despite the apparent happiness and cheer of the Old Manse, Hawthorne tells his reader that “[t]he treasure of intellectual gold which I hoped to find in our secluded dwelling had never come to light.”²⁵ The only fruit of his warm and rich life at the Old Manse consists of the tales and short stories in *Mosses from an Old Manse*. The material for a longer, weightier work that would secure Hawthorne’s literary reputation remains out of his reach. Given the mixed character of human happiness, it is significant that Hawthorne’s next move is to finally welcome the reader into his “circle of friends” suggesting that friendship provides a more complete kind of happiness.

Despite Hawthorne’s evident sadness at leaving the Old Manse and at not writing a novel, Hawthorne uses his relationship to the reader as an example of how knowledge of another person must be mediated so as to preserve both the self and the other’s inner freedom. Readers often expect to be given full access to the author’s innermost thoughts

²³ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 19.

²⁴ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 25.

²⁵ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 26.

for the sake of pleasant and easy consumption. Hawthorne emphasizes that he is not like other authors who "serve up their own hearts, delicately fried, with brain sauce, as a tidbit for their beloved public."²⁶ This comic line gently reveals how the sketch serves as re-education of the reader to encourage him to revere the proper process and limits of becoming a friend. As a serious point, however, Hawthorne refuses for his inner self to be the subject of mere amusement for his readership. A readership that expects that authors give their readers total access to their minds and hearts lacks the necessary heightened awareness and jealous protection of the mysterious and ultimately impenetrable character of the individual heart that is the basis of liberty in a democratic nation. Equality of the individual does not mean that the individual is knowable to all and so transparent. Political liberty is poorly supported and easily undermined if citizens do not recognize this. The dangerous tendency to assume that individuals are knowable demystifies the individual, robs him of his inner liberty, and opens up an avenue for manipulation and control. For Hawthorne, our political liberty depends on the belief that the individual is distinctive, partially hidden from view, and so beyond direct control of the state.

Hawthorne selects Ralph Waldo Emerson's followers as representatives of this dangerous tendency to scan the interior of the individual. As the preeminent American literary figure of the 1840s, Emerson attracted many admirers and followers and Hawthorne intentionally draws a sharp distinction between Emerson and himself.²⁷

²⁶ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 25.

²⁷ Hawthorne notes that the Old Manse's previous occupant was Emerson's father and that in the same study in which he has been working Emerson had written *Nature*. See John S. Martin, "The Other Side of Concord: A Critique of Emerson in Hawthorne's 'The Old Manse,'" *New England Quarterly*

Hawthorne compares Emerson to a bright beacon that attracted many followers looking for guidance on how to live. Emerson attracted “earnest wanderers through the midnight of the moral world” who sought his intellectual prowess as a “beacon burning on a hill top” to deliver themselves of their troubles and bewilderment.²⁸ Hawthorne’s image of Emerson as a beacon on a hill associates Emerson’s project with John Winthrop’s famous comparison of the new Puritan settle with a city upon a hill and to the Puritan tendency to seek inner transparency. Speaking of his own relationship with Emerson, Hawthorne observes that “the mountain atmosphere of his lofty thought” produces “giddiness” that makes it difficult for him to share Emerson’s company for very long.²⁹

While reluctant to criticize directly Emerson, Hawthorne observes that the many of the sort of people who flocked to Emerson as adherents picked up superficial aspects of Emerson’s teachings. Emerson’s light attracts the undesirable “bats and owls and the whole host of night birds.”³⁰ Emerson wrote extensively on originality as a philosophic concept, and his followers pretended to originality and approximate it through the superficial means of odd dress and manners—thus failing to understand Emerson’s argument concerning originality. Hawthorne much enjoys the irony that the great original American thinker attracted so many imitators. According to Hawthorne, these imitators and petty pretenders believed themselves to be “important agents of the world’s destiny”

58 (1985): 453-58 and Larry J. Reynolds, “Hawthorne and Emerson in ‘The Old Manse,’” *Studies in the Novel* 23 (1991): 60-81.

²⁸ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 24.

²⁹ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 24.

³⁰ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 24.

and yet were “bores of a very intense water.”³¹ However comical they may be, Hawthorne recognizes a great danger in Emerson’s imitators. They believe that Emerson has laid the heart bare for all to see and that they can change the world based on Emerson’s insights. Hawthorne hopes that the world shall not be “benefited by such schemes of such philosophers.”³² Hawthorne traces their error to their leader and observes that “the heart of many an ordinary man had, perchance, inscriptions which [Emerson] could not read.”³³ He fears that those influenced by Emerson will trample over the hearts of ordinary individuals in revolutionary and utopian zeal. In contrast to Emerson, part of Hawthorne’s project will be to teach his readers that the hearts of individuals are harder to read than might be supposed.

However, Hawthorne faults Emerson the most for revealing too much of himself to his followers. Individuals flock to Emerson’s side to pry and rummage among his thoughts. Emerson’s followers view Emerson as a cask for golden thoughts inside. Hawthorne faults Emerson for revealing too much of himself too easily and too immediately to his followers. Emerson appears to hold little back and so encourages his followers to view him as an instrument for conveying truths. By teaching his followers that human beings can be known completely and transparently, Emerson demystifies himself and turns himself into a container for ideas that others can abstract and use for their own purposes. Hawthorne’s point is that Emerson’s teachings distort human relationships. Because Emerson made himself appear transparent, his followers little

³¹ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 24.

³² Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 25.

³³ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 24.

value Emerson as a person but value only what can be manipulated or forced into view for their own purposes. At first, it appeared that Emerson was in an exalted position to his followers, but now, as Hawthorne reveals, Emerson's followers are using Emerson.

In contrast to Emerson, Hawthorne boasts of "how little [he has] told" of himself.³⁴ Hawthorne has been a hospitable host but has not taken the reader "wandering...through the inner passages of [his] being."³⁵ He has revealed only that which the "common sunshine is free to penetrate."³⁶ Instead of seeking treasure within the author, Hawthorne presents himself as a treasure seeker—the treasure being literary material on which to base a work—and invites the reader to join him. Whereas Emerson's followers looked for "glittering gems" within the self, Hawthorne takes the reader to search for treasure on the grounds of the Old Manse.³⁷ Hawthorne mediates his relationship with the reader by sharing with him his search for literary treasure in the Old Manse. Upon entering the Old Manse's gateposts, Hawthorne tells the reader that upon taking residency there, he hoped to "light upon an intellectual treasure in the Old Manse" that would inspire him to write a moral, philosophic, or historical work—or at least a

³⁴ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 25.

³⁵ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 25.

³⁶ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 25. This line recalls an earlier image on the tour of his grounds in which he observes that under the brightest sunshine, "[Nature] retains a secret mercy, and welcomes the wayfarer to shady nooks of the woods where the sun cannot penetrate" (13). Sunshine does not reveal all, but casts shadows and allows for secrets. Like the sunshine, Hawthorne's hospitality keeps much of his life out of view from the reader. Hawthorne intentionally cultivates an atmosphere of seclusion around his house and life so that the reader-guest can be invited in—that he notes that the reader must step off the common road to approach his house. Standing removed from the road and in the shade, the Old Manse's "domestic circle" remains concealed from direct view (3). The remoteness and sense of privacy pervading the Old Manse keeps passerbys from approaching his house, but Hawthorne welcomes the reader through the gateposts.

³⁷ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 24.

novel. Since the sketch prefaces a collection of tales, the reader knows from the start that Hawthorne will not find the literary inspiration for the novel he sought. He concludes the sketch that "[t]he treasure of intellectual gold which I hoped to find in our secluded dwelling had never come to light."³⁸ Although Hawthorne criticizes Emerson's followers for seeking original ideas over enduring thought, Hawthorne's quest for material for a novel puns on the word "novel" that can also denote originality. He looks in the garret "in search of any living thought which should burn like a coal of fire or glow like an inextinguishable gem."³⁹ However, he finds nothing living among the "frigid" religious papers.⁴⁰ He turns to the freedom of the outdoors and a company with a friend for inspiration. In idyllic sylvan surroundings, Hawthorne's friend, Ellery Channing, and himself enjoy excellent conversation, but they are unable to preserve the fruits of their conversation for others to read.⁴¹

Only the Old Manse, a symbol of convention, home life, and society, proves to be a treasure, though not the literary treasure Hawthorne looked for. Despite the pleasantness of cooking over an open fire on the banks of the river, his thoughts turn toward "the hearth of a household fire" and remarks on "how sweet was it to return within

³⁸ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 26. The first person plural pronoun in the quoted sentence does not refer to Hawthorne and the reader, but Hawthorne and his wife. Sophia Hawthorne does not appear in the sketch. See Leland S. Person Jr., "Hawthorne's Bliss of Paternity: Sophia's Absence from 'The Old Manse,'" *Studies in the Novel* 23 (1991): 46-59. Person notes that Sophia's conspicuous absence from the "The Old Manse" is intentional. Hawthorne drew material for the sketch from his notebook but removed allusions to his wife.

³⁹ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 15.

⁴⁰ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 16. Despite the theological authors' pretense to write for enduring the ages, their substance could no longer nourish readers. The only "sap" he finds is in the newspapers that were written without the thought of "permanence" and "thrown off in the effervescence of a moment."

⁴¹ Hawthorne remarks that Channing spoke "lumps of golden thought," because he cannot "stamp[] it with the mint mark that alone gives currency" neither the public nor he will benefit from it (19).

the system of human society."⁴² Private life and the ordinary domestic comforts provide the right kind of conditions for the individual to share his life with others. The Old Manse's hearth may be conventional, but Hawthorne wants to show the reader the good of living in "the system of human society" even as he brings the reader into his "circle of friends."⁴³ The hearthside is a happy scene in which the individual lives more freely through convention rather than being stifled by it and where convention preserves and provides continuity to human experience. Unlike Emerson's followers who make exterior shows of being unusual for the sake being original, Hawthorne shows his reader that such actions are misguided. The task is for convention—and political orders, as Hawthorne will later emphasize—to encourage the right kind of social relationships through which the individual can share his heart with others.

"The Old Manse" ends with a praise of convention and social living. Hawthorne goes so far as to claim that "all the artifice and conventionalism of life was but an impalpable thinness upon its surface, and that the depth below was none the worse for it."⁴⁴ This may appear to be an unusual message from an author who is usually known for his warnings against how society encroaches on the individual.⁴⁵ But this sketch makes it clear that convention makes many social goods possible. Hawthorne suppresses the risk to the individual for the sake of showing that the inner mystery of the individual is not a social creation but preserved and enhanced through social living. The distinction

⁴² Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 20.

⁴³ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 20.

⁴⁴ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 20.

⁴⁵ Cox notes that in "The Old Manse" Hawthorne expresses the "dominant value of society" (438).

between the individual and society must be understood for the sake of showing that there is something particular to the individual—his heart, as Hawthorne calls it—that is not a creation or convention of society though it may be shaped by it. The heart must be understood as proper to the individual for the sake of illustrating in *The Scarlet Letter* the monstrous violation that the Puritan community perpetrates upon Hester. By drawing the reader away from the airy heights of novel speculation that characterize Emerson's followers, he leads them toward consideration of the seriousness of the conflict between society and the individual heart that becomes the focus of "The Custom-House" and *The Scarlet Letter*.

The Custom-House

In "The Custom-House," Hawthorne tells how he finally found literary treasure for the writing of *The Scarlet Letter*—his most famous and, arguably, his finest novel—in the second story of the custom house. In the main story of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne tells a story about a political order that tries to limit private life by making the heart transparent and so eliminate wrong-doing for the sake of social well-being. The Puritans did not trust what was hidden in the soul. They saw only how the heart's mystery allowed for wrong-doing without seeing how its mystery and freedom are also the basis of individual well-being. By compelling Hester to wear the scarlet letter, they tried to make her invisible sin in her soul physically visible on her person and coerce repentance. Obviously, their effort to make visible the invisible fails. Attempting to eliminate evil in the soul by curtailing private freedom is a remedy worse than the disease. So ill-quipped and unsuited are society's methods and ways for making the heart visible that the

Puritans inadvertently pervert the relationships among individuals and cause more wrongdoing.

“The Custom-House” serves as counterpoint to Hester’s story to highlight the dangers that individualism poses to Hawthorne’s contemporary society. “The Custom-House” reveals that the political and social response to the Puritan’s violations of private life is not an exclusive private realm. An exclusive private realm, however, in which each individual’s inner life is protected from the intrusion of other particular individuals had been coming into being in the United States in Hawthorne’s time. In “The Custom-House,” he presents a society of extremely private and isolated individuals living and working in a weary and decaying environment. Like his contemporary Alexis de Tocqueville, Hawthorne predicted that Americans would tend to become more individualized, private, and isolated. Based on his observations of his fellow Americans, “The Custom-House” presents a snapshot of what Hawthorne believed American society would resemble if its extreme individualism remained unchecked.

In contrast to the Puritans, the individuals working in the Custom-House lead private lives unconnected to each other or to others outside of the Custom-House. Nothing draws the men of the Custom-House outside of themselves to the society of others and the mode of retaining their offices makes them distrustful of each other. Consequently, an officer of the Custom-House “of long continuance, can hardly be a very praiseworthy or respectable personage.”⁴⁶ In the absence of meaningful connections to other human beings, many of the men of the Custom-House appear to have lost much of their humanity. Individuals left within the narrow confines of their own souls become

⁴⁶ Hawthorne, *Letter*, 35.

less human and more animalistic. Isolation makes the men of the Custom-House powerless, fearful, distrusting, and subject to and trembling at political processes with which they are not involved.

Although once the scene of much activity, the wharf is “now burdened with decayed wooden warehouses, and exhibits few or no symptoms of commercial life.”⁴⁷ The employees of the Custom-House are often asleep; their speech is distinguished by a “lack of energy.”⁴⁸ Lethargy also characterizes their relationships to each other; they are uninterested in each other’s inner lives. Although Hawthorne came to feel affection for them, this did not lead to any reciprocal friendship. The old men did not sympathize with him. Hawthorne’s fellow Custom-House society knew him in no other capacity than by his official functions; moreover, nor, he speculates, would they have “cared a fig the more for me” if they had read his writings.⁴⁹

In an environment that permits individuals to pursue the private life of his choice without hindrance, we might expect rich, colorful, and diverse inner lives to be the result. Instead, the Custom-House is a static, infertile environment that prevents the creation and sharing of anything new. The old men live in a decaying present and lack ways to create a dynamic and lively society. Literally, the Custom-House lacks the society of women. Hawthorne notes that its slovenly appearance reveals “a sanctuary into which womankind, with her tools of magic, the broom and mop, has very infrequent access.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Hawthorne, *Letter*, 4.

⁴⁸ Hawthorne, *Letter*, 6.

⁴⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 24.

⁵⁰ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 7.

That women are needed to keep the interior of the Custom-House from appearing dirty and unfashionable may seem trivial or insulting, but we should see that women are bearers of change and life; their society and skills are integral to a healthy community. Without women, the single sex society of the Custom-House is literally and metaphorically barren. We see that the old men's conversation is sterile. Their conversation is limited to the "thousandth repetition of old sea-stories, and mouldy jokes."⁵¹ The old men of the Custom-House have nothing new to say nor can they build or create anything new from what they have. They are "a set of wearisome old souls."⁵² Though they are advanced in years, they have "gathered nothing worth preservation from their varied experiences of life" and have "flung away all the golden grain of practical wisdom."⁵³

Despite the liberty to do as he liked, Hawthorne is unable to "kindle...[his] intellectual forge."⁵⁴ The Custom-House lacked the "genial atmosphere which a literary man requires, in order to ripen the best harvest of his mind."⁵⁵ Catherine Zuckert observes that we expect Hawthorne to show much sympathy towards those like Hester who were persecuted by the Puritans, but that Hawthorne's inability to write in the Custom-House illustrates that "[t]he absence of external restraint does not produce more

⁵¹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 13.

⁵² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 15.

⁵³ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 15.

⁵⁴ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 31.

⁵⁵ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 40-1.

life or liberty."⁵⁶ Zuckert continues that while Hawthorne's fellow employees "do not attempt to suppress his poetry or regulate his imagination, their utter lack of sympathy and complete materialism work as well if not better than Puritan restrictions."⁵⁷ Pushing Zuckert's argument slightly, the Custom-House's freedom stifles more effectively Hawthorne's art than the Puritans' restraints on Hester. Hester has her needlework through which she indulges her elaborate and fanciful imagination and fills a needed role in society. Albeit subservient to public uses, Hester has an outlet for her imagination and contributes to the needs of her society whereas Hawthorne's art has little place in the Custom-House. Despite the dreariness of the office, one might expect Hawthorne to relish the freedom to enjoy a vibrant artistic life at home, but instead "[t]he same torpor...accompanied [him] home."⁵⁸ In his new study, neither the romantic moonlight nor warm glow of the fire spark his imagination.

The profiles of the Custom-House workers provide models of the different dangerous paths the United States' future might take. On the one hand, we see how many employees there have lost aspects of their humanity and have become more bestial or reduced life to business. The Inspector illustrates how humans may degrade themselves and become bestial by thinking mostly of their stomachs. The Inspector had had three wives all of whom had died and about twenty children many of whom had died as well. No trace of lingering sorrow could remain in the Inspector who "carr[ied] off the entire

⁵⁶ Catherine H. Zuckert, "The Political Thought of Nathaniel Hawthorne," *Polity* 13 (Winter 1980), 166.

⁵⁷ Zuckert, "Political Thought," 166.

⁵⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 32.

burden of these dismal reminiscences” in a short sigh and then was “ready for sport.”⁵⁹ What occupied the Inspector’s thoughts more completely were food and the various meals he had eaten. Hawthorne imagines that “so cunningly had the few materials of his character been put together, that there was no painful perception of deficiency.”⁶⁰ Like an animal, the Inspector lacked self-awareness. Similarly deficient in self-awareness, the “man of business” understood the operation the Custom-House better than anyone else and kept its operations moving.⁶¹ He was “prompt, acute, clear-minded; with an eye that saw through all perplexities,” and an integrity that was irreproachable.⁶² Raised from a boy in the Custom-House, the “man of business” knew nothing of matters beyond the Custom-House’s interest. In short, he was the perfect businessman who lived to work but had little other use for his life. Both the Inspector and the businessman live reduced, narrow lives that if not unhappy certainly lack the capacity for greater human well-being.

On the other hand, Hawthorne also shows the reader how the resilient the soul is and unlikely to wither away. Instead, aspects of the soul have fallen into decay or have been isolated because social avenues that bring individuals together have atrophied. So little remains of the old general to be observed that Hawthorne sees only the ruins of what might have been and what is therefore humanly possible. With kind imagination and “affection,” Hawthorne speculates that the old general’s portrait was “marked with noble

⁵⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 16.

⁶⁰ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 16.

⁶¹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 22.

⁶² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 22.

and heroic qualities” that he had earned “of good right.”⁶³ The old general’s heart “was never the kind that flashes and flickers in a blaze, but, rather, a deep, red glow, as of iron in a furnace.”⁶⁴ Hawthorne supposes that the old general’s spirit could be reawakened. Other small examples and gestures of unseen inner depths may be glimpsed. A Naval officer provides Hawthorne with some literary talk. The Collector’s junior clerk occasionally chatted about books and was rumored to write poetry. A former seaman and now inspector (not to be confused with the one described above) frequently moved Hawthorne “to laughter and admiration by his marvelous gifts as a story-teller.”⁶⁵ The Custom-House has not eradicated the warmer human sentiments and artistic imagination, but malnourished them and provides too few occasions for their revelation or development. Within the Custom-House there is the potential for friendship.

Community weakly exists in the Custom-House. It is a collection of individuals who happen to be together through self-interest and the capricious turns of the spoils system. When Hawthorne chides officials of the Custom-House including himself for “lean[ing] on the mighty arm of the Republic,” he observes that “his own proper strength departs from him.”⁶⁶ Officials of the Custom-House may lead private lives, but not free lives. The old men of the Custom-House are enslaved to their comfort and ease supplied by the Republic. The Republic does not give freedom, but independence from others in the form of material comfort. Though the Custom-House denizens are independent and

⁶³ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 19.

⁶⁴ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 19.

⁶⁵ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 33.

⁶⁶ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 35.

free in their private lives, they are not happy. Presidential elections expose the sham ease of the Custom-House and are events to be dreaded. The old men of the Custom-House felt “the periodical terrors of a presidential election.”⁶⁷ Fear is the strongest passion operating within the Custom-House.

In the beginning of his employment at the Custom-House, Hawthorne’s appointment roused concern among its denizens that he might replace them with others of his own party. The Custom-House employees are mostly members of the Whig party and feared Hawthorne because he was a Democrat appointee who had the power to fire them. As a matter of natural and partisan right, Hawthorne tells the reader, the old Whigs knew they should give way to younger men and to Democrats. The old Whigs “dreaded” Hawthorne since he could metaphorically “bring every one of those white heads under the axe of the guillotine.”⁶⁸ However much natural and partisan right enabled Hawthorne to fire the old men of the Custom-House, he was unable to do so, for he had developed a fondness for them. Once the old men became assured of retaining their positions, they resumed their ease. Despite Hawthorne’s concern for them, their concern for Hawthorne as a person extended only so far as he had power over their jobs. Once they were secure that Hawthorne would not fire them, they resumed their animal ease and gentle indifference to him. The stillness of and want of vigor in the Custom-House belies the fear that underlies it. Without public spiritedness, fellow-feeling or friendship underlying a community, the Custom-House employees enjoy little concord or pleasure in each other’s company.

⁶⁷ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 12.

⁶⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 13.

In contrast to the presidential elections in Hawthorne's day that are accompanied by panic and terror, celebration and public spiritedness surround the Puritans' Election Day. The celebration surrounding the Election Day illustrates how the Puritans were bound together by an overriding sense of purpose and mission to see the new government thrive. Consequently, they employed all arts that could "give majesty to the forms in which a new government manifested itself to the people."⁶⁹ Hester's fine needlework contributed greatly to the Puritan's "somber, but yet studied magnificence."⁷⁰ Dimmesdale's final sermon takes place on Election Day, which was treated as a public holiday. Election Day brought together the diverse inhabitants of the New World to mark the beginning of a new political year. A large, colorful crowd of townspeople, remote forest settlers, sailors and even some Indians gathered to witness and celebrate the procession of the city's political leaders. The newly arrived Puritans brought with them a weakened, but still festive remnant of the resplendent Elizabethan traditions that accompanied political events.⁷¹ They retained celebrations and magnificence intended to dignify and establish the new government such as formal, ornate dress and processions. Although the Puritans enjoyed a more austere commemoration, we see that children were given a holiday from school, artisans such as the blacksmith washed and wore their best clothes, and music accompanied the simple procession. Even though juggling and theatrics were not permitted, sports such as wrestling and swordfight retained a role since

⁶⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 73.

⁷⁰ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 74.

⁷¹ Hawthorne assures us that these celebrations were a "dim reflection of a remembered splendor" from their native England and lacked the usual Elizabethan "bonfires, banquets, pageantries, and processions" as well as theatrics, minstrels, and jugglers (212).

they were thought to engender desirable qualities such as courage. The Puritans' Election Day permitted room for merrymaking and united diverse peoples together under the same government. Contrasted to presidential elections, these mirthful celebrations accompanying the political procession illustrate how we have lost the sense of festivity and common purpose in political life.

Although Hawthorne did not fire all the Whig employees upon receiving his office, he was viciously ejected from office himself by the incoming administration when Zachary Taylor won in 1848. As a victim of the spoils system, his criticisms of the incoming Whig administration's house cleaning may seem like a case of bitter grapes and general partisanship. Presidential elections release the worst in human nature. Hawthorne criticizes the opportunistic use of an election to unleash vengeful passions on their fellow citizens. Relying on the power of the Republic, the Whigs used their victory as an opportunity to do what they otherwise lacked the courage to do. There is a "bloodthirstiness that is developed in the hour of triumph" in which people "grow cruel, merely because they possess the power of inflicting harm."⁷² He observes that

[i]f the guillotine, as applied to office-holders, were a literal fact, instead of one of the most apt metaphors, it is my sincerest belief, that the active members of the victorious party were sufficiently excited to have chopped off all our heads.⁷³

An allusion to the guillotine cannot fail to recall its ample use during the French Revolution to purify France of its enemies. Hawthorne links the American passion for reform and the spoils system with the same spirit of purging that led to the guillotine. The spoils system takes the place of executions, but does not extinguish the bloodthirsty

⁷² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 37.

⁷³ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 37.

spirit behind reform movements. He hints that it might take very little more vengeance to move to more literal means of purging society. Individuals fired up for reforms tend to care more about their causes than for individuals and permit gross injustices to particular individuals for the sake of an abstract future society. When individuals are isolated from and indifferent to each other and utterly focused on their private affairs, little remains to temper baser impulses and they become more vicious in their treatment and regard for each other. Hawthorne feared the apparent growing divisiveness in the United States and saw that American society might dissolve into brutality.

The Scarlet Letter

Before turning to how the main story of *The Scarlet Letter* further illustrates the human heart as the basis of liberty and happiness, I will give a short summary of the story's events. After the summary, I will examine the key relationships depicted: Hester and the Puritans, Hester and Pearl, Hester and the Puritan leaders, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, and Dimmesdale and Hester. Through consideration of these, properly speaking, faulty and impaired relationships, I argue that Hawthorne shows the reader not just the flaws, but also the potential and the room for friendship.

The main story of *The Scarlet Letter* begins at the prison door in which a crowd of serious looking Puritans wait for Hester Prynne, the adulteress, and her new-born child to leave the prison. Designed by Hester, the fabulously decorated and embroidered letter "A" in red and gold thread is a badge she must wear so long as she lives in the Puritan community. In addition to having carried her child to term in prison, Hester must stand on a public scaffold with her child, living proof of her crime, where Reverend Wilson and

then Reverend Dimmesdale admonish her to reveal the name of the child's father and her co-sinner. Hester refuses.

Prior to the opening of the story, the reader learns that Hester had been sent ahead of her husband to the newly founded city of Boston and that he appears to have been lost at sea when he journeyed to join her there. During her public punishment on the scaffold, a stranger comes into the crowd whom Hester recognizes as her husband. Presenting himself as a doctor and under the name Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband in a private interview with her later that evening also presses Hester to reveal the name of her lover. Hester again refuses. Chillingworth vows to discover the identity of her lover--"to read [guilt] on his heart"--and gains her promise not to reveal his identity to anyone.⁷⁴

Released from the prison, Hester enters the Puritan community on the peripheral and still under punishment as the bearer of the scarlet letter. Hester and her daughter, Pearl, find an abandoned house away from the town and near the border of the forest. Although shunned by society, Hester finds a niche in society for her to earn her living through her needlework. Despite the Puritans' distain for embellishments and preference for simple dress, they have need for finery on their clothes for public ceremonies. Hester's exquisite needlework can be found adorning official robes of state, funeral gowns, and baby clothes (Hawthorne notes that babies wore public "robes of state"), but not for wedding gowns.⁷⁵ Although Hester wears plain and course clothing, excepting her magnificent red badge, she dresses Pearl in the finest and decorates her clothing with splendid needlework. At the age of six, Pearl proves to be so impish, wild and not

⁷⁴ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 68.

⁷⁵ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 74.

"amenable to rules" that some in the community believe it might be best for the child to be removed to another's care.⁷⁶ Hester goes to Governor Bellingham's residence where she privately pleads her case to keep her child to Bellingham and other leading members of the community. With Dimmesdale's advocacy, Bellingham grants, or rather, honors Hester's right to keep her child.

Meanwhile, Chillingworth has found his victim, Arthur Dimmesdale. Under the pretext of assisting the ailing minister as a physician and friend, Chillingworth lives in the same quarters as Dimmesdale and through their frequent conversations probes his heart mercilessly. For his part, Dimmesdale is unable to recognize Chillingworth's evil purpose. While enjoying a stainless reputation, Dimmesdale suffers under the weight of his guilt and his hypocrisy. Despite near relentless impulses to confess his crime, Dimmesdale does not. And he believes that, however hypocritical he may be, he is still able to help others.

During one of Dimmesdale's most despairing moments, he goes to the scaffold where Hester stood in public, but at night and alone. By chance, Hester and Pearl pass by and join him on the scaffold. Hester realizes the anguish Dimmesdale has suffered but still keeps her silence about Chillingworth's true identity. Yet, seeing Dimmesdale's pain works upon Hester and she later resolves to speak with Chillingworth. Whereupon, she lets him know that she will keep her promise no longer. Here it becomes apparent that Chillingworth's long dark task has impoverished his humanity and he is almost more fiend than human.

⁷⁶ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 81.

In the forest, Hester and Dimmesdale speak with each other privately. Hester reveals her secret to Dimmesdale. Although angry at Hester for keeping Chillingworth's identity secret for so long, Dimmesdale forgives her. They reconcile and even plan to escape Chillingworth and the Puritans by returning to Europe and starting a new life there as a family. Relieved by the intention to flee, Dimmesdale returns to the city and writes his final sermon for the Election Day—the day of their planned escape. On the Election Day, Hester learns that Chillingworth has discovered their intentions to flee and that he intends to follow them. Although the reader is not shown when or why, Dimmesdale realizes that he cannot escape Chillingworth or his guilt by leaving the community. He concludes his sermon by taking his place on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl and then dies. In the epilogue, Hester and Pearl journey to Europe where they stay for many years. While Pearl remains in Europe, Hester returns to Boston and resumes wearing the scarlet letter. Her house on the border of the forest becomes a place for other troubled individuals to seek comfort, advice, and friendship.

Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850—an auspicious year in American history in which Congress attempted to preserve the union through the Compromise of 1850 and its fugitive slave provisions. Yet the Compromise could not resolve the divisive issues surrounding slavery itself nor could it hide the apparent and growing rift in American society. Sacvan Bercovitch observes that other contemporary literature, such as *Moby-Dick*, *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, “deal more or less directly with fears of social fragmentation.”⁷⁷ Hawthorne’s contemporaries

⁷⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch, “The A-Politics of Ambiguity in *The Scarlet Letter*,” *New Literary History* 19 (Spring 1988), 648.

explored possible ways in their literary works to reclaim unity. *Walden* and *Leaves of Grass* reflect “transcendent unity” and “depend on a utopianism.”⁷⁸ Yet, Hawthorne did not seek to create a unity nor did he hope for a utopian future.⁷⁹ According to Bercovitch, Hawthorne retreats to America’s past “in order both to acknowledge the fear and to evade conflict.”⁸⁰

Contrary to Bercovitch, I argue that Hawthorne deliberately returns to America’s past to depict the Puritans as a failed utopian model of unity in order to caution against contemporary efforts that seek transcendent and abstract wholes. In this respect, Brook Thomas observes that Hawthorne was unique among his contemporaries for criticizing the Puritans. In the antebellum period, Thomas notes, it was common “to read the

⁷⁸ Bercovitch, “A-Politics,” 648.

⁷⁹ Given Hawthorne’s clear affiliation with the Democratic party, his friendship with and advocacy for Franklin Pierce, Hawthorne’s political views, particularly with regard to slavery, have received much scholarly attention. Despite disagreements among scholars on Hawthorne’s precise views on slavery, scholars generally accept that he had little interest in abolitionists’ reforms and was quite wary of them. Hawthorne saw in the abolition movement another utopian project. Some scholars, such as Eric Cheyfitz and Allen Flint, maintain that Hawthorne held a pro-slavery position, or at least an ambivalent view on slavery. See Eric Cheyfitz, “The Irresistibility of Great Literature: Reconstructing Hawthorne’s Politics,” *American Literary History* 6 (1994): 539-58 and Allen Flint, “Hawthorne and the Slavery Crisis,” *The New England Quarterly* 41 (1968): 393-408. Flint finds in Hawthorne’s ambivalence a “tendency to avoid a clear position on important matters” (395). Moreover, he concludes that Hawthorne “felt and perceived the problems, denied the solutions that others proposed, and was unable to formulate better solutions” (408). Although Laura Hanft Korobkin maintains that Hawthorne was not pro-slavery, she argues that Hawthorne so greatly feared abolitionists and their frequent advocacy of vigilantism that he committed himself to strict rule of law regardless of individual suffering. “The Scarlet Letter of the Law: Hawthorne and Criminal Justice,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 30 (1997): 193-217. Korobkin argues that *The Scarlet Letter* teaches that “immediate unfairness is *not* the point” but that “we must suffer and obey what appears today to be harsh and oppressive law because in the long run maintaining the community is more important than protesting injustice” (italics in original, 206). Attempting to draw a more sympathetic profile of Hawthorne, Richard Predmore argues that “Hawthorne’s early neglect and occasional insensitivity to the wretched and exploited is eventually replaced by interest and ultimately by sympathetic understanding” in “The Development of Social Commentary in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Works: 1828-1844,” *Colby Library Quarterly* 20 (1984): 8. Predmore refers, for the most part, to Hawthorne’s increased interest in and abhorrence of northern industrialism, materialism, and exploitation of the politically weak. Yet, despite this sympathetic turn in Hawthorne’s sentiments, Predmore qualifies that Hawthorne exhibited little hope in or desire for progress, reform, or social justice.

⁸⁰ Bercovitch, “A-Politics,” 648.

Puritan past teleologically" and to see in the Puritan concept of citizenship the seeds of freedom yet to come.⁸¹ Thomas notes that George Bancroft's *History of the United States*, a common history book, helped popularize the image of the Puritan settlements as the beginnings of American democracy and freedom. The romanticized picture of the Puritans' strong and unified community reflects a longing and a searching in antebellum America for such unity that was obviously lacking as regional strife and discord became prevalent. Hawthorne, however, approaches these overriding concerns for American fragmentation and need for unity by striking out a different direction and looking at the United States' past, but with a critical eye. According to Thomas, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne challenges this sanitized depiction of the Puritans.⁸² Though democratic, the Puritans were weak on individual freedom. Hawthorne understands that democracies were not necessarily establish liberal policies and can be quite oppressive, even authoritarian. The kind of unity the Puritans enjoyed came at a terrible price to the human heart and is not a desirable model for the United States.

This is why at a crucial point in the story Hawthorne tells the reader that the "scarlet letter had not done its office."⁸³ As mechanism to reveal Hester's heart and to induce her to repent, the scarlet letter fails. The Puritans thought they could bring "iniquity...out into the sunshine" but failed to see that part of the human soul remains inaccessible and utterly private.⁸⁴ The attempt to peer into the inner life of another,

⁸¹ Brook Thomas, "The Scarlet Letter' as Civic Myth," *American Literary History* 13 (Summer 2001), 182.

⁸² Thomas, "Civic Myth," 182-184.

⁸³ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 150.

⁸⁴ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 49.

however, proves to have detrimental effects both to the individual and to society. The scarlet letter was supposed to punish Hester, to redeem her, and to signal the community's authority over her. Even as the badge of shame marks Hester and distinguishes her from everyone else, it was also intended to bring her back into the community and compel her to recognize her sin. It backfires and instead drives Hester away from the Puritan community. The Puritans are doubly shortsighted. Watching Hester caring for the poor and the sick, the Puritans come to consider her a great comforter and many venture to interpret the letter A as "Able."⁸⁵ They mistake Hester's external appearance and behavior for repentance and piety. Since the Puritans think they have brought Hester's private sin into public view, they overlook the danger she poses to their community.

Wearing the scarlet letter radically frees Hester's thought. She "assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter."⁸⁶ Hester's radically outside perspective does not open her up to new truths. In her free mental wanderings, she is, however, trapped between feeling isolated and hopeless and impassioned for radical change. Forced into being outside of society alienates her from others and she begins to see her fellow Puritans as obstacles to social transformation. Contemplating whether women can be happy in society as it is, Hester speculates on how to tear down society and start over. Hawthorne notes that Hester could have become like Ann Hutchinson, another Puritan discontent,

⁸⁵ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 146.

⁸⁶ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 149.

and founded another sect. It seems likely that Hester's effort "to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment" would have been more violent and destructive than Hutchinson's.⁸⁷ The colony only banished Hutchinson, but Hawthorne supposes that Hester would have received death for her effort. Hawthorne leaves it to the reader to imagine what kind of violence Hester could have wrought upon the Puritans. But these moments of zeal for reform often gave way to despair and sometimes she contemplated murdering Pearl and committing suicide.

What prevents Hester from leading a rebellion among the Puritans is Pearl, her daughter. Hawthorne relates that "[p]rovidence" gave Pearl to Hester for Pearl's care and education.⁸⁸ Pearl both reminds Hester of her sin and aids her redemption because Pearl is lovable whereas the scarlet letter is not. The scarlet letter and Pearl both come about due to Hester's transgression. The scarlet letter, however, is imposed by Puritan law and Pearl by providence. The scarlet letter is both the attempt of the law to mark Hester outside the community and also demonstrate their authority over her. As observed above, the scarlet letter cannot regulate Hester's thoughts, but, in fact, by keeping her outside of the community, allows her the widest sort of freethinking. As a piece of artifice, the scarlet letter attempts to do clumsily what Pearl accomplishes with greater ease. Pearl both marks the fact of Hester's transgression and connects her to society. Pearl brings Hester back into society in two ways. First, she provides Hester with a constant and understanding companion. Like the scarlet letter which Hester always wore, she never went anywhere without Pearl by her side. As the daughter of an outcast mother, Pearl

⁸⁷ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 149.

⁸⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 149.

was excluded from the society of other children. As such, she "comprehended [her mother's] loneliness."⁸⁹ Pearl understands her mother's plight in a way that others do not. In her childish fashion, Pearl defends her mother. She becomes angry at the children who taunt her mother and throw stones at them. Hawthorne reveals to us that "[t]hese outbreaks of a fierce temper had a kind of value, and even comfort, for her mother."⁹⁰ Secondly, Pearl connects Hester to another human being, Dimmesdale. Only after the night in which Pearl holds the hands of both her mother and father on the scaffold does Hester understand the extent of Dimmesdale's suffering and decide to help him by revealing to him who Chillingworth is.

Clearly, Hawthorne thought the Puritans erred to think they could make the private public. Mistaken as they were in this respect, the Puritans were not a malicious people. Hawthorne often goes out of his way to show readers the sympathetic heart of the multitude even in Puritan society and the good and bad sides of individuals. As Hester stood on the scaffold, she could expect the most sympathy from the "larger and warmer heart of the multitude."⁹¹ Of the character of Roger Chillingworth, the "intuitions of [the multitude's] great and warm heart" were rightfully guarded and suspicious.⁹² This is in contrast to Dimmesdale's friends who believed Chillingworth's influence to be providential. The women waiting for Hester to leave the prison expressed varying degrees of condemnation with the exception of one compassionate woman. The

⁸⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 84.

⁹⁰ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 85.

⁹¹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 58.

⁹² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 114.

officials who judged Hester may have been "good men" but were not suited to judge upon "an erring woman's heart."⁹³ Reverend Wilson was a kind man, but his kindness was "rather a matter of shame than self-congratulation."⁹⁴

Hawthorne takes great care to explain how these first emigrants "had not been born to an inheritance of Puritanic gloom," but rather were "native Englishmen."⁹⁵ They were more lenient than their children because they were not raised under the laws they promulgated. Hawthorne described with much care how Governor Bellingham retained a native taste for Elizabethan furnishings and enjoyed distinctly English pursuits such as "ornamental gardening."⁹⁶ The governor's private residence and his habits resembled those found in England and "the genial benevolence of his private life" was a credit to his character.⁹⁷ Hawthorne notes that this "worldly enjoyment" may surprise his readers, but says that

it is an error to suppose that our grave forefathers—though accustomed to speak and think of human existence as a state merely of trial and warfare, and though unfeignedly prepared to sacrifice goods and life at the behest of duty—made it a matter of conscience to reject such means of comfort or even luxury, as lay fairly within their grasp.⁹⁸

This is an important point to Hawthorne, because it shows how we sometimes misunderstand the words and deeds of our Puritan ancestors. By setting Hester's

⁹³ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 58.

⁹⁴ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 58.

⁹⁵ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 211.

⁹⁶ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 96.

⁹⁷ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 98.

⁹⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 97.

interview with the Governor Bellingham in his private residence, Hawthorne shows us Governor Bellingham at his best. Although he criticizes the Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter*, he does not mean to repudiate them entirely.

Hester knows that making her case to Bellingham in a private interview at his home will be more likely successful if the decision is made away from the public sphere. Hawthorne clearly indicates that the Puritans brought private life excessively into the public sphere such that it resulted in absurdities. Lesser private matters than the welfare of Pearl under Hester's care were "*strangely* mixed up with the deliberations of legislators and acts of the state" (italics mine).⁹⁹ A dispute over the property rights invested in a pig leads to restructuring the legislature. Hawthorne, however, notes the "intrinsic weight" of Hester's right to care for her daughter, but distinctly puts it outside of the public's proper scope.¹⁰⁰ This curious episode reveals the difference in how these men conduct themselves in private than they did when they carry out their public duties when Hester stands on the scaffold. They are still stern and have the same concerns for morality, but they deliberate and are more open to persuasion. Moreover, the impulse to remove Pearl from Hester's care is motivated—at least in the case of Bellingham, "the not unkind old minister," by genuine interest in Pearl's well-being.¹⁰¹ Dimmesdale argues that the relationship between a mother and child is sacred. This argument piques Bellingham's interest so much that he interrupts Dimmesdale and asks him to "[m]ake that plain."¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 91.

¹⁰⁰ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 91.

¹⁰¹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 101.

¹⁰² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 102.

Dimmesdale, however, does not, because he cannot make plain the sacred. Instead, Dimmesdale supposes the damage they would cause by interfering with God's means of punishing and rehabilitating Hester if they decided that Hester and Pearl's relationship was not sacred. Bellingham is satisfied with Dimmesdale's arguments. Dimmesdale makes an extraordinary argument that cannot be made in the public square, because it affirms that there are certain relationships among individuals that are beyond the reach of the public. Lest it be thought that Hester passively turns to Dimmesdale to plead her case, she establishes the ground on which Dimmesdale makes his argument. Hester asks him to make her argument because as her former priest, he knows better what is in her heart. Bellingham and Wilson accept Hester's point. By agreeing that there is a special relationship between priests and parishioners, they accept in principle that there are relationships among individuals that are private and that the Puritan community has little right to disturb. Hester's and Dimmesdale's joint argument represents a move from the conflict between the individual and society to creating a space for relationships among individuals that enjoy some measure of immunity from full public disclosure.

Despite their belief that they can bring sin into sunshine, the Puritans show more restraint and respect for the individual heart than Chillingworth, who viciously probes Dimmesdale's without restraint or sympathetic feeling. In the interview with Governor Bellingham in which Hester pleads to keep her daughter under her care, Chillingworth suggests to Mr. Wilson, an older minister, that they examine Pearl to discover within her character her paternity. Mr. Wilson responds that it would be "sinful" to find out by that

method and it would be better "to leave the mystery as we find it."¹⁰³ Although religion motivates the Puritans to be suspect of mysteries, here is a rare instance in which religion restrains them. Unwittingly, Mr. Wilson observes that there are methods of searching the soul of another individual that harm oneself. Mr. Wilson may be inconsistent, but his error points him in the direction of truth.

Chillingworth's scientific mind however knows no such boundaries. In this respect, Hester fares better than Dimmesdale who is subject Chillingworth's unchecked torments upon his soul. Hawthorne shows us how Chillingworth's scientific outlook leads him to misunderstand the true causes behind human relationships. In the first interview between Chillingworth and Hester, Chillingworth takes upon himself part of the responsibility for Hester's sin, claiming it was his "folly" to have married her, after she had frankly told him that she did not love him. In his desire for happiness, he believed that nevertheless she could warm his heart.¹⁰⁴ The twin pursuits of study and learning occupied Chillingworth's youth and maturity; he realized that his heart was "lonely and chill, and without a household fire" and desired "that simple bliss, which is scattered far and wide, for all mankind to gather up."¹⁰⁵ Appearing to be magnanimous, Chillingworth claims to have first wronged Hester by "betray[ing] thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay."¹⁰⁶ We can have sympathy for Chillingworth who desired the happiness of companionship and friendship of a wife, but

¹⁰³ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 104.

¹⁰⁴ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 66.

¹⁰⁵ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 67.

¹⁰⁶ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 67.

we should see that he erred from the beginning. Chillingworth speaks of his quest for happiness as an empirical scientist, or more precisely, a chemist, looking to combine the right elements. What he means by “simple bliss” is not mutual love but the image of a husband and wife together as he had observed other couples. He mistook the appearance of domestic felicity in other couples for the thing itself. He speaks of the failure of his marriage as poorly mediated experiment to combine unlike elements such as youth and decay or oil and water. As a man of science, Chillingworth betrays his preference for material causes and disposition to treat hearts (such as Hester’s) as objects to be manipulated for his own use. Hester’s love formed no necessary part of his happiness and certainly he did not either consider or care whether she needed love to be happy. It should come as no surprise then when he claims that he will discover the name of Hester’s lover “as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy.”¹⁰⁷

Chillingworth’s investigation into Dimmesdale’s heart transforms him into a diabolical character. Hawthorne tells us that Chillingworth had been “calm in temperament, kindly, though not of warm affections.”¹⁰⁸ This transformation relates to the way in which his scientific pursuits accustomed him to consider the world. Chillingworth’s scientific mind led him to err by marrying Hester and leads him to err a second time in his project to uncover her lover’s identity. Hawthorne shows us that he falsely believes that he wants only the truth and supposes that “the question involved no more than the air-drawn lines and figures of a geometrical problem, instead of human

¹⁰⁷ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 68.

¹⁰⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 116.

passions and wrongs inflicted on himself.”¹⁰⁹ Like a mathematician solving a problem, he abstracts from himself and from those involved so that he can operate upon them for his own use.

Motivated by private vengeance, Chillingworth accesses Dimmesdale’s heart by posing as a personal friend to Dimmesdale better than the Puritans could touch Hester’s heart by imposing the scarlet letter.¹¹⁰ Outwardly, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale have the appearance of friendship. They are both learned men among the Puritans and converse on varied subjects freely as friends might. In short, they are intellectual equals and have a “kind of intimacy” between them and they share thoughts and ideas as close friends might.¹¹¹ Chillingworth, however, treats Dimmesdale as a subject of study to be probed scientifically for the “dark treasure” of his soul.¹¹² He abuses his knowledge of Dimmesdale’s heart, perverts friendship, and uses his knowledge to exert a tyrannical hold over Dimmesdale. Seeming to himself to penetrate the mystery of Dimmesdale’s heart, Chillingworth is an actor in Dimmesdale's soul and maliciously manipulates him. That Chillingworth does not succeed entirely gives pause, because Dimmesdale escapes

¹⁰⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 116.

¹¹⁰ Since the Puritans believed the scarlet letter would transform Hester internally, they were not less intrusive into Hester’s heart. However, it is important to remember that the Puritans wanted to punish Hester whereas Chillingworth wanted to torment Dimmesdale. There is not a strict analogy between the friendship of individuals and the friendship within a society. A political order has the authority and a claim to the power and force necessary to punish a member of its own for transgression. The Puritans used force to accomplish an illegitimate end--to expose Hester's soul to public punishment. As a friend, Chillingworth has no claim to authority over Dimmesdale.

¹¹¹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 112.

¹¹² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 126.

him on the scaffold at the end of the novel by declaring his sin publicly.¹¹³ However successful Chillingworth may have been he cannot unveil entirely Dimmesdale's heart.

The cruelty of uncovering the inner heart involves a loss of freedom not only for the victim but also for the perpetrator. Although Chillingworth robs Dimmesdale of much of his freedom, the damage to Chillingworth's soul may be greater. Chillingworth might be utterly lost to himself. Under the illusion of scientifically seeking the truth "terrible fascination...seized the old man within its gripe [sic], and never set him free again, until he had done all its bidding."¹¹⁴ No longer is Chillingworth able to turn away from the project he set for himself. In the midst of telling Hester of how he tormented the minister, Chillingworth experiences a rare moment of inward reflection and realizes with horror that he has turned into a "fiend."¹¹⁵ Hester implores him to "purge [the hatred] out of thee, and be once more human."¹¹⁶ Instead, Chillingworth retreats into determinism; claiming that "it has all been a dark necessity...It is our fate. Let the black flower blossom as it may."¹¹⁷ Although he attributes his fatalism to his faith, his determinism relates more to scientific materialism than to Calvinism. He relieves himself of any responsibility and freedom to act otherwise.

¹¹³ Hester and Dimmesdale have renewed their friendship in the forest, but it is not welcome among the Puritans. This is why they plan to flee to the Old World under false names and, as Hester suggests, "[b]egin all anew" (181). But Dimmesdale knows that would be to live another lie in another society. During the procession, Hester learns that Chillingworth plans to follow them to Europe and would like a nemesis continue his torments wherever they go (224). The room or the middle ground for Hester and Dimmesdale to be together does not yet exist in the Puritan community.

¹¹⁴ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 116.

¹¹⁵ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 156.

¹¹⁶ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 157.

¹¹⁷ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 157-58.

Dimmesdale errs as well. Fixated on his own sin and hidden secret, he distrusts everyone and alienates himself from the possibility of real friendship. He cuts himself off from the only kind of relief that a friend can offer another—a sympathetic ear and heart—and fails to recognize a true enemy in Chillingworth. Dimmesdale has some inkling of the damage his suspicion of other people has cost him when he exclaims to Hester “[h]ad I one friend,—or were it my worst enemy” to share his secret. If he had had a friend or an enemy with whom he could have been true, he could have borne his secret more easily.¹¹⁸ A friend might have kept him from the despair he feels. Being true to a friend is like being true to yourself, because a friend is one that you love like yourself. What Dimmesdale wants is to share his secret without exposing his whole soul to the public. It is common to tell our friends things about ourselves that we do not want everyone to know. But the Puritans have made this middle option impossible. Instead, he is stuck between keeping his secret absolutely private and telling everyone. Dimmesdale understands this when he wishes for a friend to whom he could have shared his secret. Instead, he loses hope and cries out that “it is all falsehood!—all emptiness!—all death!”¹¹⁹ Dimmesdale’s suspicion and distrust of society lead to isolation and despair.

To Dimmesdale’s request for a friend, Hester tells him “[s]uch a friend as thou hast even now wished for...thou hast in me.”¹²⁰ She informs him that he had an enemy as well in Chillingworth, who was her husband. At first, Dimmesdale rejects Hester and

¹¹⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 176.

¹¹⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 176.

¹²⁰ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 176.

angrily says “[w]oman, woman, thou art accountable for this! I cannot forgive thee!”¹²¹ His reaction is surprising given that he had just expressed desire for a friend or an enemy (and he has both!). The long habit of concealment threatens to ruin this opportunity to be honest finally with someone. His long isolation and despair has taken a toll and he almost misses the chance to forgive. Fortunately for Dimmesdale, Hester does not give up. Her pleas for forgiveness soften him and he grants it. Their friendship was delayed by the passage of seven years in which the sin festered in Dimmesdale’s soul and Hester remained indifferent. Hawthorne suggests that either Hester had only been dimly aware of this possible injury or that “in the misanthropy of her own trouble” she left him alone.¹²² When Hester witness Dimmesdale’s midnight vigil, she realizes the injury her silence on Chillingworth’s identity caused him. Whereupon she resolves to make Chillingworth’s true identity known to her former lover. Friendship awakens in us concern for the good of our friends. Hester comforts and counsels Dimmesdale, sharing with him her strength as they plan to flee to the Old World. Part of the tragedy in the novel is that their friendship comes too late to save Dimmesdale from death.

The scarlet letter, as argues Sacvan Bercovitch, transforms Hester into "an agent of socialization."¹²³ When Hester returns to the Puritan community, resuming wearing the scarlet letter, her home becomes a "meeting ground for dissidents" who feel the burden of Puritan restrictions.¹²⁴ According to Bercovitch, Hester's scarlet letter has

¹²¹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 178.

¹²² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 176.

¹²³ Bercovitch, 629.

¹²⁴ Bercovitch, 629.

finally integrated her into the community, because she has voluntarily resumed wearing the scarlet letter and consequently accepted the community values. The scarlet letter, Bercovitch argues, "functions as a guide to the process (or telos) of Americanization."¹²⁵ Voluntarily wearing the letter resolves the conflict between society and the individual, because Hester has learned "how to restrict herself."¹²⁶ Bercovitch concludes that the conflict between society and the individual is not so much solved as transcended into a hope for future progress in which room for pluralism is gradually achieved. As Bercovitch describes Hester's socialization, her assent to self-denial for the sake of progress does not actually connect Hester to society—to other particular individuals—but to the abstract principle of consent.

Yet, Bercovitch leaves Hester committed to an abstract principle that denies her any means of acting for good. When Hawthorne tells the reader that "[t]he scarlet letter had not done its office," it is after describing Hester's despair for society's general well-being. Only after standing on the scaffold with Dimmesdale during the night does Hester find "a new theme of reflection, and held up to her an object that appeared *worthy of any exertion and sacrifice for its attainment*" (italics mine).¹²⁷ Hester realizes that her promise to Chillingworth to conceal his identity has brought great suffering to Dimmesdale. In contrast to Hester's visions for social reconstruction and murderous and suicidal despair of achieving it, the opportunity to rectify her previous error calls forth her willingness to act. Abstract contemplation of social betterment arises from Hester's

¹²⁵ Bercovitch, 631.

¹²⁶ Bercovitch, 635.

¹²⁷ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 150.

feelings as a victim. She despairs that she cannot bring out the "mightier change" needed in the nature of women to start the revolution in relations between the sexes.

Seeing Dimmesdale suffer through Chillingworth's concealed manipulations enables Hester to act because she recognizes that his suffering is, in part, her responsibility. Without ambiguity, Hester understands that she had made a choice—she was not forced or fooled into concealing Chillingworth's identity from Dimmesdale despite the potential harm Chillingworth could and did inflict on Dimmesdale.¹²⁸ At the time in her prison cell, she had reasoned that agreeing to conceal Chillingworth's identity would prevent Dimmesdale from suffering the same sort of public ruin and shame that she experienced. In retrospect, she chose "the more wretched alternative of the two."¹²⁹ Hester now sees how she wronged Dimmesdale and also sees a way to help him. She courageously confronts Chillingworth and then tells Dimmesdale who Chillingworth is and makes it possible for Dimmesdale to escape Chillingworth's manipulations. It is Hester's particular relationship to Dimmesdale that gives her the wherewithal to act on his behalf and ameliorate past wrongs.

Hawthorne as Author and Friend

Though at opposite extremes, both the Puritans and the Custom-House fail to negotiate fairly how individual happiness and social concord depend on combining the private and the public. Hawthorne's solution is friendship, because friendship mediates

¹²⁸ During her confrontation with Chillingworth, Hester remarks that "there seemed no choice to me" to conceal his identity (154). In this case, she refers to how it appeared to her at the time. During her retrospective reflections, Hester realizes that she had a choice.

¹²⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 151.

society and the individual to preserve and enhance freedom. Through his novel, Hawthorne teaches the appropriate way to approach the human heart so as to preserve and respect that mystery by presenting himself to the reader as a model for how a friend treats a friend.

As an artist, Hawthorne offers up a creation of his imagination, but he shares as one might share with a friend not out of compulsion divulging the contents of his soul, but by freely choosing to do so. Hawthorne relates the story by sharing with the reader his own incomplete access to the truth, thereby teaching the reader about the right way to approach the hearts of others as a friend. The authorial pretense as discoverer and editor of Hester's story distances the author and the reader from the story. In this way, both author and reader indirectly come to know about Hester, Chillingworth and the rest of the characters—for it is from the papers Hawthorne finds and from others with whom he has inquired that Hawthorne and the reader gather information about them. The author does not present himself as standing in a superior position to the reader that allows him to reveal and conceal what he chooses. Rather, reading *The Scarlet Letter* is a joint experience for the author and the reader, because the author has shared with us what limited knowledge he has.

First, Hawthorne pretends to have found the story instead of inventing it. In fact, according to Hawthorne, his purpose for writing "The Custom-House" is to serve as an account of how "a large portion of the following pages" concerning the history of the scarlet letter came into his possession and to establish him "in my true position as editor,

or very little more.”¹³⁰ In the attic of the Custom-House, he claims to have found several papers belonging to Jonathan Pue, a former holder of his position as surveyor of customs, which contained much early history of Salem and the scarlet letter artifact itself. Putting himself in the position of a reporter, he gives readers numerous details intended to corroborate his claim as discover and editor. He describes the precise measurements of the scarlet letter, and claims to have shown the scrap of fabric to knowledgeable women who confirmed its particular method of embroidery was a forgotten art. Surveyor Pue’s history serves to supply facts not only for Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* but also for his short story, “Main Street,” and contains enough further material for a history of Salem.¹³¹ Moreover, the papers and the scarlet letter, Hawthorne tells us, remain in his possession should any inquirer desire to see the proof for himself.

Hawthorne, however, soon qualifies his pretense to be merely an editor of a discovered historical record. He goes on to admit that he has not “invariably confined [him]self within the limits of the old Surveyor’s *half a dozen sheets* of foolscap” (italics mine).¹³² He continues that he permitted himself “as much license *as if* the facts had been entirely of my own invention” (italics mine) and that all he “contend[s] for is the authenticity of the *outline*” (italics mine, 30).¹³³ All Hawthorne obtains from the handful of the pages that are Pue’s is the outline of the story. Hawthorne claims that the discovery of Surveyor Pue’s papers served to bring his mind back from the stultifying

¹³⁰ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 4.

¹³¹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 28.

¹³² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 30.

¹³³ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 30.

ways of the Custom-House to his previous literary habits by providing “groundwork of a tale.”¹³⁴ As explicitly as Hawthorne will allow, he admits that most of the story is that constitutes *The Scarlet Letter* is his invention.

Hawthorne goes to a great deal of trouble to demonstrate the historical accuracy of his story. Yet, while carefully crafting his story as if it were historical fact, he intentionally shows that the historical record itself is incomplete. Pue’s record is a narration of “oral testimonies” given by elderly Bostonians (in Pue’s time) in which they recall Hester from their youth.¹³⁵ Moreover, by Hal Bythe and Charlie Sweet’s reckoning, except for maybe one or two individuals of extreme old age, witnesses to Hester’s old age would have died about 25 years before Pue could have reasonably conducted interviews.¹³⁶ At most, they only remember her as an old woman herself long after her return to Boston and as a “kind of voluntary nurse” and could not have been witnesses to the events of her less reputable past that have apparently faded from public memory.¹³⁷ No direct accounts of why Hester wore the scarlet letter exist nor does Hawthorne directly claim that he got that part of the story from the record itself (he does not tell us the details of the outline, but only insists he obtained it from Pue’s papers). Instead, Hawthorne leaves it ambiguous which part of the story Pue’s narrative supplies and which part he creates.

¹³⁴ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 30.

¹³⁵ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 29.

¹³⁶ See Hal Bythe and Charlie Sweet, “Hawthorne’s Dating Problem in *The Scarlet Letter*,” *ANQ* 16 (2003): 36.

¹³⁷ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 29.

Hawthorne deliberately—almost with a heavy hand—parallels the fruitless search for treasure in the Old Manse's garret to the discovery of Surveyor Pue's record of the scarlet letter. Both adventures take place on rainy days in which Hawthorne looks through papers kept in an attic. In the attic of the Custom-House Hawthorne happens upon (instead of seeks) the package with the embroidered letter and its record and believes he has found "treasure."¹³⁸ Rummaging around the dusty old religious books there, Hawthorne speculates that the "works of man's intellect decay like those of his hands."¹³⁹ The bodily remains of Surveyor Pue decayed, but "traces of Mr. Pue's mental part, and the internal operations of his head" remain.¹⁴⁰ Hawthorne supposes that Pue kept up his mental operations through local antiquarian interests. From the short summary of Hester's curious life, Hawthorne senses "the groundwork of a tale."¹⁴¹ The ghost of Surveyor Pue, "[Hawthorne's] official ancestor," visits him in the Custom-House and charges him to make his record of Hester's story public.¹⁴² This is a particularly rich episode that has two other incidents of comparison. The Old Manse, Hawthorne notes wryly, like all old New England residencies, houses a ghost. This ghost's phantom behavior suggests that he probably wants Hawthorne to edit and publish the moldering manuscripts in the garret.¹⁴³ Hawthorne shows no inclination whatsoever to carrying out

¹³⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 27.

¹³⁹ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 15.

¹⁴⁰ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 27.

¹⁴¹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 30.

¹⁴² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 20.

¹⁴³ Hawthorne, *Mosses*, 14.

this task and proceeds to argue that no living ideas are to be found among these papers. Why does Hawthorne so dramatically depict the barren Custom-House providing the inspiration for a novel that the apparently rich Old Manse fails to inspire?

Daniel Cottom argues that by assuming the editorship of Surveyor Pue's manuscript and the executor of his ghostly wish, Hawthorne assumes a near otherworldly distance from his work that allows him keep his distance from the story. However, Cottom exaggerates the extent of Hawthorne's neutrality and "diffident style" by effectively collapsing Surveyor Pue's ghost and Hawthorne.¹⁴⁴ Consequently, Cottom sees Hawthorne as editor "appears as the generous characteristic of one so removed from the realm of judgment that he can at once embrace and explore the limitations of all other viewpoints."¹⁴⁵ Cottom rightly sees that Hawthorne as editor distances himself from the story and can present the diverse viewpoints of the Puritan community (that by definition cannot be not a "single-minded community") without claiming to know the truth of each.¹⁴⁶ However, the advantage of this position is not to reveal that all judgments are limited and so err, as Cottom implies. Instead, Hawthorne as editor allows the reader to choose among viewpoints while providing some guidance about the truth of some viewpoints. After Dimmesdale dies on the scaffold, Hawthorne reports the various accounts given by those present and witnesses to the same event and says that [t]he reader may choose among these theories," but this statement applies only to the reports

¹⁴⁴ Daniel Cottom, "Hawthorne versus Hester: The Ghostly Dialectic of Romance in *The Scarlet Letter*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 24 (1982): 49.

¹⁴⁵ Cottom, 49.

¹⁴⁶ Cottom, 51.

that saw a letter on Dimmesdale's chest.¹⁴⁷ "Most" reported seeing the mirror of Hester's scarlet letter printed on Dimmesdale's chest, but they disagreed on how the letter came to be on his chest.¹⁴⁸ "Some" believed Dimmesdale carved it himself. "[O]thers" believed that Chillingworth's necromancy made it appear, and yet "others" believed that the "awful symbol" revealed "outwardly (through the body's connection to the spirit) the remorse of his "inner heart."¹⁴⁹ A minority claimed to have seen no mark whatsoever on Dimmesdale's chest and that he never confessed to sleeping with Hester. Hawthorne as editor assumes the first plural "we" and says that "we must be allowed to consider this version of Mr. Dimmesdale's story as only an instance of that stubborn fidelity with which a man's friends...will sometimes uphold his character."¹⁵⁰

Through the novel, Hawthorne gives the reader access to the minds of his characters, but ultimately, the reader is only given partial or incomplete direct revelations of the heart. A frequent technique of Hawthorne is to survey public opinions. In this way, he suggests that these public opinions offer some aspect of the truth and perhaps an aspect of it that the reader could not have known if given unmediated access to the heart. The chapter titled "Another View of Hester" begins with a decidedly public view of Hester in which Hawthorne reports how society's view of Hester shifted. If one of the formerly ill she had nursed wished to greet her on the street, she would point to her scarlet letter as a wordless way of refusing conversation. Hawthorne tells us that "[t]his

¹⁴⁷ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 237.

¹⁴⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 236.

¹⁴⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 236.

¹⁵⁰ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 237.

might be pride, but was so like humility, that it produced all the softening influence of the latter quality on the public mind.”¹⁵¹ This perception was “more...perchance, than she deserved,” and we never see directly into Hester’s heart to know whether she acted from pride or humility although we may suspect the former.¹⁵² Hawthorne does not force us to have a particular opinion, but shows us her actions and so we are free to choose her motivation and our own opinions. Hawthorne does more than decline to tell us the contents of his characters’ souls, but suggests that he cannot see all things in their hearts. Wearing the scarlet letter left Hester diminished in beauty and “[s]ome attribute had departed from her.”¹⁵³ He says “[w]e shall see whether Hester Prynne was ever afterwards so touched, and so transfigured” as to restore this departed attribute.¹⁵⁴ By showing the reader the various opinions held in the community, Hawthorne pairs reader and author in joint observation of Hester’s dynamic personality.

By allowing the reader the freedom to form his own opinions of his characters, Hawthorne also respects his character’s inner hearts as if they were real persons. This is another reason why he undertook to make the story appear based on historical facts and persons. He recognizes that not all the Puritans’ opinions are alike. All the varied opinions present in the market-place must come from somewhere and the Puritans cannot fully suppress freedom of thought connected to private life. Public officials were slower to acknowledge Hester’s good works than the rest of society. In their capacity as public

¹⁵¹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 146.

¹⁵² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 147.

¹⁵³ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 148.

¹⁵⁴ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 148.

figures, the rulers have to maintain a “guardianship of the public morals” and officially disapprove of Hester.¹⁵⁵ He notes that “individuals in private life” had forgiven her.¹⁵⁶ In this way, he reminds us that even the public officials have private lives and may have privately forgiven her as well, but this he does not reveal. By incompletely revealing to us his character’s hearts, Hawthorne keeps to us his promise at the beginning of the novel to violate neither our rights nor his own. In short, he has been a true friend and teacher.

Neither the Custom-House nor the Puritan society is capable of keeping truth wholly private or public. In various ways, the truth shines outward into society and nature in both. The old general’s face “gleamed out...proving that there was light within him” or a “ray of humor, now and then, would make its way through the veil of dim obstruction, and glimmer pleasantly upon our faces.”¹⁵⁷ Nor are all the Custom-House employees insensible to art inasmuch as Hawthorne describes discussing Shakespeare and Napoleon with the Naval Officer or the junior clerk who was rumored to write poetry at his desk. Among the Puritans, Hester’s needlepoint skills are an outlet for expression of her “fantastic ingenuity.”¹⁵⁸ In the forest, the sunshine bursts forth when Hester tosses the scarlet letter aside and her love for Dimmesdale is renewed, because love “filling the heart so full of radiance, that it overflows upon the outward world.”¹⁵⁹ Hawthorne notes that even had not nature reflected their love, Hester and Dimmesdale’s eyes would have

¹⁵⁵ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 147.

¹⁵⁶ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 147.

¹⁵⁷ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 18-9 and 20.

¹⁵⁸ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 75.

¹⁵⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 187.

seen the forest more brightly. The inner soul can radiate and illuminate the outward world. These short movements of truth from the soul outward accomplish two important tasks. First, they show that human law and convention cannot fully manage the human heart to keep it either wholly private or public. As a consequence, moreover, even in these disordered societies potential exists for a restoration or establishment of the proper relationship between the private and the public. This second point is particularly vital, because if there were no potential for change, Hawthorne could not offer friendship as a third alternative.

Another model for friendship emerges in the final pages of the novel with Hester's return. Indeed, we see the hope for how to bring about change in the Puritan society. Upon returning, Hester freely resumed wearing the scarlet letter. She finds a new place for herself in society beyond the public uses of her needlepoint to which she was previously limited. She becomes a friend and a teacher to those suffering and seeking guidance. Hester finds a way short of dramatic social transformation or giving up hope and seeking death. She "comforted and counseled" those who sought her that "a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness."¹⁶⁰ The kind of relationship Hester envisions based on "mutual happiness" of both men and women is friendlier in which the happiness of both spouses matters.¹⁶¹ This differs from her own marriage in which Chillingworth had believed that he could have "simple bliss" with Hester even though he

¹⁶⁰ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 241.

¹⁶¹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 241.

knew she did not love him.¹⁶² Hester befriends those who seek her and shares with them her hope for a new kind of society; thereby she teaches them and lays the foundation for change. By voluntarily returning and resuming her wearing of the scarlet letter, Hester carves out room for friendship.

The Scarlet Letter does not have a happy ending that unites Dimmesdale, Hester and Pearl as a family. The first chapter ends by characterizing the story as “a tale of human frailty and sorrow.”¹⁶³ It is, however, a tale of hope. Hawthorne hopes that the pitfalls of the Puritans and the Custom-House can be avoided and reaches out to his readers to say “let us hope” that “some sweet moral blossom” may come of this tale.¹⁶⁴ The Custom-House and the Puritans are extreme in their treatment of the heart and allow for few ways for individuals to become friends. By keeping the heart either wholly private or public, these societies prevent their members from communicating with other hearts. Both the Custom-House and the Puritans suppress the possibility for friendship and happiness. Society ought to be organized so as to encourage freely made connections and relationships among its citizens. There are limits to society’s reach so as to allow for the proper degree of freedom left to the individual for him to have flourishing friendships. A good society allows for intercourse between the private and public in which our hearts are our own, but yet we can freely seek out those few who will understand us. *The Scarlet Letter* is Hawthorne’s gesture of friendship to the reader in

¹⁶² Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 67.

¹⁶³ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 43.

¹⁶⁴ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 43.

which he shares his hope that the joyless and decaying future of the Custom-House may be avoided.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Now that we have looked at how some of our American novelists depict the pursuit of happiness, we may more fully evaluate how the American regime has served the pursuit of happiness. As discussed in Chapter 1, the project for this dissertation is to consider American novelists as guides on the pursuit of happiness who with a critical eye can present the shortcomings of pursuing happiness in a liberal nation but also present alternatives and correctives compatible with liberalism. In these respects, our novelists serve as more comprehensive guides than happiness research and liberal theory.

Happiness studies usefully point to weaknesses in liberal nations and highlight some goods that typically contribute to a happy life. As happiness researchers have found, one of the chief shortcomings of liberal nations is that they provide so little guidance on happiness. For example, we tend to overestimate the extent to which wealth and material comfort contribute to happiness and seek these goods as the chief means of happiness to the exclusion of cultivating and pursuing other non-material goods that constitute happiness. At present, efforts to use happiness studies to influence policymakers and inform policy remain nascent and speculative. The use of happiness studies to inform policy may be opposed by democratic institutions that give lawmakers little incentive to stray too far from voter preferences in crafting legislation. Furthermore, attempts to inform policy with happiness findings may lead to manipulative and doctrinaire policy.

On the other hand, liberal theory decries state attempts to define happiness as a major threat to individual liberty. Liberalism hesitates to give a definite shape to what is

happiness. Liberalism expects that individuals disagree on what happiness is and that it is beyond the capacity of the state to arbitrate. Nevertheless, liberalism posits that liberty is an essential component in the individual pursuit of happiness. The individual cannot meaningfully pursue happiness except by his own free activity. Part of happiness is finding it freely oneself. Given liberty, individuals will use their liberty to pursue happiness differently. The incompleteness of our political order aims to protect the varied ways individuals understand and pursue happiness.

We need guides on happiness that are compatible with liberalism's respect for and protection of the many voices concerning happiness, but that also help us to think critically about what happiness is and how it may be pursued. Although liberal political orders, such as ours, may shy away from state guidance, their doing so leaves open other sources of guidance that flourish outside of our "parchment regime." As I argued, our novelists are guides who can provide insights into prospects for happiness in a liberal nation and also affirm liberalism's commitment to protecting the plurality of voices that arise through the pursuit of happiness. Our novelists anticipate many of the criticisms of liberal nations that happiness researchers have uncovered, but turn to corrections and alternatives compatible with and possible within the United States. Through depicting characters pursuing happiness, our novelists show how our political and social order does or does not facilitate the pursuit of happiness and what individual decisions can contribute to or detract from happiness. In so doing, our novelists provide signposts and other markers to indicate what roads and pathways are or are not likely to contribute to happiness. They bring to light the American tendency to use the pursuit of happiness as a justification for neglecting and breaking social and personal relationships, but recognize that it is through the cultivation of human ties that happiness is known. Furthermore, it is

through engaging the reader in an examination of the pursuit of happiness that our novelists avoid the doctrinaire approach of happiness research and provide an example of how the pursuit of happiness can be a collaborative activity. In these remaining pages, I will highlight how each author examined here illustrates how our novelists provide assistance through their novels for the individual to consider what is happiness and how it is to be pursued.

In Chapter 2, I examined Tom Wolfe's three novels, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, *A Man in Full*, and *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, as examples of the pursuit of happiness in contemporary America. Wolfe approves of liberalism's commitment to political liberty as a necessary condition for the pursuit of happiness, but recognizes that without the courage to strike out on one's own, Americans too often follow popular opinion. For Wolfe, the first step of the pursuit of happiness requires the courage to resist popular opinion. In the absence of strong social classes shaping the individual, Americans seek status within different status groups. The trouble is that the things that bring status are not the same as those that contribute to happiness and may cause individuals to desire lesser goods at the expense of goods that might contribute to their happiness. (Here Wolfe's critique of the pursuit of happiness differs little from the findings of happiness researchers.) This is precisely what happens to Sherman McCoy who pursues status among Wall Street's elite stockbrokers. His astonishing success and overweening self-confidence lead him to believe that he deserves a young mistress and that he can succeed in taking take financial risks. Both decisions precipitate his financial and personal ruin. Stripped of his supposed mastery and at the mercy of the machinations of others seeking to gain by his ruin, Sherman learns real self-mastery and so fights to keep his freedom and restore his family. The common link in Wolfe's novels is the paramount importance

of cultivating courage within the individual so that he may break from misleading status groups that promote false goals and to seek or create groups more able to contribute to his happiness.

In Wolfe's last two novels, he highlights more robustly the need not only for courage, but the need to find the proper moral and educative support for courage that liberalism inadequately supplies, and ways in which to do it. Wolfe recognizes that for our political liberty to be maintained and meaningfully utilized in the pursuit of happiness, individuals must understand themselves as free and responsible beings. Wolfe turns to ancient thinkers to find understandings of the human being that support moral liberty and courage. In *A Man in Full*, Conrad demonstrates untutored courage and concern for the inner integrity of his soul but is unable to express his unformed opinions until reading the stoic Epictetus. Epictetus teaches Conrad that his soul is like a spark of the divine and so is too dear to be compromised and is worth preserving above material comfort and even personal liberty. True liberty and happiness is found in the care of the soul, because the inner self is the only thing that one has control over. Conrad may not be able to control what happens to him, like being imprisoned, but he can control how he responds. Wolfe tempers stoicism's self-sufficiency with the recognition that human beings need company and friendship in the pursuit of happiness. Conrad does not become a loner, content within the impregnable chambers of his inner self, but rather uses his courage to defend the weak and shares his stoic lessons with others, particularly Charlie Croker. Charlie, like Sherman, pursued to his ruin goods that failed to bring his happiness. Through Conrad and Charlie's friendship, Wolfe shows how friends assist each other. By Conrad's example and stoic message, Charlie learns to care for his soul as the real seat of virtue and self-worth over the exterior and physical signs of power and

strength. Together Conrad and Charlie renounce their former lives to become evangelists for Zeus.

On the other hand, in *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Wolfe faults our universities for neglecting to provide students with the liberal education that prepares individuals to live as politically and morally free beings. Without preparation to live as a free person, Wolfe recognizes that individuals will have few defenses against popular opinion—especially given our status-seeking behavior. Despite appearing to be proud and independent, Charlotte Simmons finds that her education fails to provide her with the moral courage to resist peer pressure. Furthermore, Wolfe criticizes the kind of philosophic and scientific viewpoints commonly espoused at contemporary universities that deny moral liberty and so transform human relationships into contests for power and control. Charlotte believes that her intelligence and education are tools of domination and power rather than means for developing the moral habits needful to a free person. Charlotte finds the popularity and status she desires, but instead of bringing her happiness, her pursuit of popularity leads to discontentment. Wolfe, again, turns to the ancients, particularly Socrates and Aristotle, to provide grounds for moral liberty. Jojo, a star basketball player, turns toward liberal education for the promise of learning to live as a free being and to seek happiness. *I Am Charlotte Simmons* represents a severe critique of America's university system for neglecting the purpose of a liberal education. Without cultivating our youth to believe in moral liberty of every individual, our society risks undermining our political liberty and opens itself up to manipulation.

Like liberal theorists, Wolfe draws away from defining happiness, but suggests that happiness consists in of having the fortitude to resist popular opinion and not being afraid to live apart from the crowd. While Wolfe severely criticizes our society for

attaching status to false pursuits and ill preparing individuals to use their political liberty, he does not question the pursuit of happiness itself. In Chapter 3, we saw that Walker Percy, in contrast, focuses on the pursuit of happiness as a goal that prevents us from realizing what our discontent reveals about ourselves. Percy recommends that we see our unhappiness as a starting point for self-reflective inquiry. Additionally, the pursuit of happiness leads individuals to consider themselves in isolation from others. More than anything else, the pursuer of happiness experiences loneliness and isolation from others. Instead of the pursuit of happiness in which individuals restlessly try to become happy, Percy suggests the search in which we look to others not simply as means that contribute or detract from happiness but as fellow searchers with whom we can share our search. Our fellow human beings, neighbors, and friends constitute our greatest resource in our search.

The Moviegoer is Percy's classic presentation of Binx Bolling's turn toward the search and discovery of his cousin, Kate, as a fellow searcher with whom he marries. Binx rejects the pursuit of happiness with which he identifies "everydayness"—a condition identified with the liberal pursuit of happiness. "Everydayness" distracts the individual from his unhappiness to pursue happiness by following expert advice, being a good citizen and consumer, and hobbies. Additionally, Binx rejects his Aunt Emily's Southern stoicism that at first appears to offer an alternative to liberalism that accepts unhappiness with noble rectitude, but, as Percy shows, stoicism, like liberalism, refuses to confront unhappiness and discover what feelings of discontent reveal about the self. Instead, unhappiness holds a clue and provides a fortunate beginning point to understanding the self. Moreover, the search can be shared. It is a joint-venture that brings individuals together in common activity in which they may discuss and learn from

each other. Binx and Kate marry and Percy ends the novel not with happily ever after—their problems are not solved—but with the assurance that Binx and Kate are fellow searchers.

In *Lost in the Cosmos* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy discloses a more critical perspective toward (and warning against) the pursuit of happiness as aligned with scientific attempts to bring happiness under human control and direction. Percy is deeply concerned that scientific attempts to manage happiness and well-being for society will undermine the individual capacity to search with others. Percy fears that despite liberalism's commitment to liberty of the individual to pursue happiness, members of our society, so disillusioned with fruitless efforts to pursue happiness individually, will turn to experts to increase their well-being. In *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy uses the book's self-help format to teach and engage the reader in a joint search. Additionally, in the book's second space odyssey, Captain Schuyler, the leader of Earth's few survivors, must choose either to found an utopian society on Europa (New Ionia) dedicated to scientific well-being or to lead an eclectic society in Lost Cove, Tennessee that preserves human beings as troubled selves—selves capable of destructiveness but also of leadership, love, and laughter. By focusing on the choice to Captain Schuyler, Percy highlights that it remains a matter of human choice if we turn to experts in the hopes that they can make us happy or if we turn to each other to find guidance. *The Thanatos Syndrome* builds on this theme, but Percy focuses on illustrating how the scientific approach to happiness exposes us to manipulation and deception. Comeaux and Van Dorn succeed in removing unhappiness and increasing well-being, but as Percy shows their solution to unhappiness comes at the cost of our liberty and our capacity for happiness and well-being that satisfies our human longings for self-understanding and companionship. Tom More and

his band of friends and supporters may thwart Comeaux and Van Dorn, but as Percy makes clear, the tendency to seek scientific solutions remains a live threat. Percy's purpose is to show that the search is more compatible with the liberty we cherish than the pursuit of happiness. Furthermore, the search brings real relief from the anxiety of unhappiness through discussion and companionship with fellow searchers.

As shown in Chapter 4, Edith Wharton provides a unique voice among our novelists as demonstrated by her belief in the usefulness and salutary effect that social structures can have on individuals and in attaining happiness. Unlike Wolfe and Percy who rely on individuals to shape their own paths, Wharton argues in favor of traditional social structure and classes to help shape individual lives. Wolfe and Percy depict characters rejecting social groups and joining or forming others. Wharton recognizes the harms and abuses that society perpetuates, but she recognizes much irreplaceable good worth preserving and more harm in their demise. Without social structure, human life lacks wholeness, stability, and some element of rest, or respite from the pang of desires that drive so much restive and fruitless activity in the United States. Much like Percy who warns against the pursuit of happiness, Wharton also recognizes a dangerous side to the pursuit of happiness. Unless understood and cultivated within traditional society that curbs the American characteristic love of comfort and ease and promotes the well-being of the individual through his social relations, the pursuit of happiness becomes the satisfaction of individual desire. Set in the early 20th century, *The Custom of the Country* depicts Undine Spragg's unrestrained chase after self-gratification. Despite dedicating herself to pleasures and other comforts of life, Undine finds little enduring pleasure in her possessions. Almost as soon as she gains one pleasure, she moves toward another. Undine lets no individual or custom stand in her way and treats all individuals as objects

to be manipulated in her pursuit of happiness. Wharton shows us the brutality and futility of Undine's chase by which she uses and discards individuals as instruments in her acquisition of material pleasures. For Undine Spragg, happiness is the ultimate justification for treating every relationship as a means to that end. Undine marries four times, depletes her parents' wealth, indirectly contributes to the suicide of one of her former husbands, and cares little for her son's education and well-being.

In contrast to Undine, *The Age of Innocence*, set a generation earlier than *Custom*, shows how traditional society can beneficially restrain individuals to do their duty, which may be unpleasant and seemingly counter to happiness, but can serve individual happiness from the perspective of a lifetime. Newland Archer marries traditional May, but falls in love with her more exotic cousin, Ellen. Wharton presents a complex picture of Newland's internal struggle in which she demonstrates awareness of society's shortcomings. Newland's love for Ellen, his recognition of society's cruelty to Ellen and hypocrisy regarding marital affairs, and the ways in which Newland realizes that he had been guided unreflectively by society all contribute to Newland's decision to leave May and follow Ellen. Wharton, however, shows that Newland Archer stays with May as an act of duty and obligation—realizing his fatherly responsibility—in denial of his immediate desire for Ellen, but that in the end he reflects upon his life with evident satisfaction. Newland's happy life reflections come about as a result of foregoing his immediate happiness in contrast to Undine's frenetic pursuit of pleasures that disappoint despite her unflinching resolve to put herself first. Wharton takes care to show that Newland as an individual enjoys a whole, full, and more satisfying life with May in which he raises a family. For Wharton, the good and happiness of the individual can only

be realized through human relationships, such as family obligations, that are protected and safeguarded by traditional society.

While in agreement with Wharton that the individual heart is shaped by society, Hawthorne emphasizes more clearly the dangers that disordered communities can have on the individual. In Chapter 5, I examined Nathaniel Hawthorne's works, "The Old Manse," the Custom-House sketch, and *The Scarlet Letter*, and made the case that for Hawthorne, the mystery of the human heart is the source of our liberty and happiness and that his appeals to the reader in friendship provide a model for sharing our hearts. By learning how to respect the mystery of our inner selves and of those nearest to us in friendship and other private associations, we are better prepared to support political measures that similarly honor the dignity and liberty of the individual. In "The Old Manse," Hawthorne takes the reader on a tour of his grounds and house in which his ultimate objective is to introduce the reader into his "circle of friends." Hawthorne constructs the tour so as to bring the reader by degrees and approximation to the interior of the house and through delays and digressions to his study. Being initiated into Hawthorne's "circle of friends" happens in stages (from outside to inside) and partially (the reader does not see every room in the house, like the kitchen and bedrooms). With tender caution we should approach the inner self of another, both for the sake of preserving the other's freedom and for our own. Only by doing so do we cultivate the proper respect for the rights and dignity of individuals without which we risk the corrosion of our political liberty. Hawthorne's attack on Ralph Waldo Emerson and his followers is motivated by a concern that those who claim to know and reveal the interior

of the individual destroy the mystery of every particular person and open up roads of thought headed towards manipulation and exploitation.¹

The Custom-House sketch, which introduces the main story of *The Scarlet Letter*, provides a glimpse into Hawthorne's life as a customs official in Salem and presents his contemporary society in contrast to the Puritan society. It presents a different kind of danger to the mystery of the human heart. Individuals live so freely that they lack a community through which they can enter into the human relationships that are essential for the sharing of hearts. The Custom-House is marked by lethargy, decay, and intense narrow individualism. With little binding them together beyond the commercial activities of their common occupation, the Custom-House employees live lives that are opaque. Despite near limitless freedom with respect to living the private life of their choice and making, there is little evidence among the Custom-House employees of any richness of thought and robust feelings present in their inner lives. Indeed, Hawthorne experiences a kind of spiritual barrenness beyond mere writer's block that prevents him from composing new works. Maximum individual liberty does not foster the communal conditions for individuals to develop their inner lives through their relations with each other. Echoing Wharton against unrestrained individualism, Hawthorne acknowledges that communities help shape our lives and are needed for the encouragement of human happiness. Confined within themselves, the custom-house employees' pleasures and contentment seem more bestial than human. Here Hawthorne's description of the kind of well-being possible in the Custom-House resembles Percy's characterization of the self-suppressing, drug-induced well-being crafted by the scientists in *The Thanatos Syndrome*.

¹It should be stated clearly that Hawthorne does not argue that Emerson's thought supported manipulation of the individual. Rather, he saw in Emerson's thought certain tenets that if expanded upon could lead to more doctrinaire theories and practices among his followers. To a great extent, Hawthorne criticizes Emerson for irresponsibility.

Hawthorne shows that the Custom-House employee's effortless tranquility is superficial and easily disturbed by presidential elections. The employees hold their jobs depending on the winning party and so their happiness is subject to distant forces beyond their control that have little interest in their well-being. Moreover, the private liberty of the Custom-House offers little security against political manipulation. In this way, Hawthorne prepares his readers before reading the main story of *The Scarlet Letter* to see that the corrective to the Puritan's society is not unchecked individual liberty.

While Hawthorne warns against Emerson's thought as dangerous for its potential for abuse, the main story of *The Scarlet Letter* depicts in full what a society dedicated to making the individual transparent would be like. The Puritans recognized that the impetus to sin originates in the hidden interior of the soul and so sought to bring to light and to the surface all the hidden things of the heart. Hester's red badge of public condemnation is supposed to be a sign of her inner self, but Hawthorne shows us that the scarlet letter does not correspond to her interior and does not work upon her to bring about repentance as the Puritans expect. The good news is that the Puritans' plan to expose to plain view the individual heart fails. Human communities do not have the means and knowledge to reveal the contents of the heart nor can they work upon the heart to produce desired and predictable results. The bad news is that the misguided attempt to do so is highly destructive of the human relationships that political orders should foster in the community.

Hawthorne does not leave his reader hopeless and without guidance. Hawthorne shows that even in the faulty Puritan society—and by implication, all political orders will come short—Hester decides to help Dimmesdale by telling him the truth about Chillingworth's identity. Likewise, Dimmesdale helps Hester by showing her that they

cannot hope to escape their sins by fleeing for Europe. Though Hester and Pearl leave for Europe, Hester eventually returns, resumes wearing the scarlet letter, and becomes a consoler and friend to those in need. *The Scarlet Letter* does not have a perfectly happy ending, but a poignant and peaceful conclusion. It acknowledges that human life is marked by sin and frailty as well as goodness and strength, and so earthly happiness is sweetened with a measure of sorrow.

Moreover, Hawthorne uses the telling of Hester's story as a way to teach the reader how a friend approaches and respect the mystery of the heart. Hawthorne teaches by presenting himself as a friend to the reader with whom he shares Hester's story that he "found" in the Custom-House and through his narration technique in which he provides limited and often partial access to the thoughts of his characters. Friendship is a corrective to the pitfalls of the Custom-House and the Puritan society. Friendship presents a way for individuals to share their hearts with one another, which is necessary for the development of their inner lives. It provides a way for individuals to relate to others freely of their own initiative and to different degrees of disclosure.

Hawthorne provides the most straightforward example among the novelists examined of reaching out in friendship to the reader,² but the need to cultivate personal relationships freely initiated and pursued as the means and beginning of happiness is a common theme underlying the diversity of ways to happiness. Through this examination, we have seen numerous and quite different approaches to the pursuit of happiness that nevertheless support the need for companionship and sympathy in the pursuit of happiness. In his fight against opportunistic and mercenary political forces, Sherman

² Walker Percy's self-help book *Lost in the Cosmos* is another example of the author directly addressing the reader.

McCoy finds examples of loyalty and honor within the legal system and persists in fighting for his freedom for the sake of regaining his family. Newland Archer reconciles himself to his duty to his family and finds contentment and fulfillment by making use of his social prominence both to preserve the past and to push for social reform. Charlie and Conrad become friends and seek to share stoicism's concept of human dignity and integrity with others. Binx and Kate marry in recognition of their mutual need for companionship in their search. Hester returns to the Puritan community and assumes freely the wearing of the scarlet letter for the sake of being a counselor and friend. Even unhappy characters like Undine Spragg and Charlotte Simmons are unhappy because they expect to gain happiness in a solitary fashion. Through their stories, our novelists invite readers to join them in an inquiry into what happiness is and the ways of its pursuit. The relationship between the author and reader provides the template for understanding the role of personal relationships to pursuing happiness. It is through joint inquiry into happiness that individuals embark on their pursuit of happiness.

Our novelists' deepest critique of the Declaration is that the liberty that the pursuit of happiness protects undermines the social relationships through which happiness is cultivated. The individual liberty that the pursuit of happiness protects is popularly construed for the sake of being able to get in and out of relationships easily as convenience and pleasure dictate. (Such interpretations of the Declaration also forget that the Declaration was a joint undertaking of a people.) The danger, as our novelists agree, is that our official "parchment regime" will come to inform all of our relationships. It is the application of the Declaration's revolutionary, regime shattering principles to all human relationships that is so potentially destructive of effectively pursuing happiness. Americans mistakenly seek freedom from social bonds as a means to happiness and often

endanger and break relationships and bonds under the guise of seeking happiness. In the cause of happiness, Americans may reason that their interests are best served by breaking relationships for the sake of chasing after something else. The pursuit of happiness is a socially and politically harmful doctrine that permits individuals to sever ties with other individuals whenever that relationship appears to constrain the individual from pursuing his happiness. At its most destructive, the pursuit of happiness is the ultimate escape clause. Nothing it seems can stand in the way or constrain the individual to stick with an enterprise or relationship that he freely entered into, because the individual's present evaluation of what is in his self-interest must trump whatever obligations or arrangements he may have previously made.

As our novelists illustrate, the intensely individualistic pursuit of happiness produces disconnected, lonely, and unhappy individuals. It is the task of the novelist to expose the pitfalls of this national characteristic to treat the pursuit of happiness as a license for self-gratification and release from social obligation. For example, by showing the excessive independence in the Custom House, Hawthorne reveals how a people may isolate themselves through a misunderstanding of how political liberty should support the pursuit of happiness and what political liberty is useful for. In so doing, he emphasizes the extent to which the pursuit of happiness is not primarily about liberty from other individuals, but liberty for the sake of working toward happiness together. Undine enjoys near unlimited liberty to break and reshapes at her will and convenience her relationships; yet her ceaseless motion indicates deep-seated discontentment. At the end of *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Charlotte seems unable to accept Jojo as an equal, a friend, and companion. Although disgusted with the pursuit of material goods, Binx is a

disconnected and isolated individual who has a difficult time realizing the importance of friendship and companionship to living well.

On the other hand, Hawthorne also illustrates through the Puritans that isolation may result from too little privacy. In Puritan society, the political order effectively squeezes out mediating human relationships that depend on privacy and secrecy such as the family, friendships, and other private associations that stand in between the individual and society at large. The Puritans tried to construct a society in which the hearts of the individual members were transparent to all. Instead of engendering community and fellow-feeling, the perverse effect of this policy was to alienate Hester and to drive her toward destructive and revolutionary thoughts against her fellow community members. Likewise, Percy shows that if Captain Schuyler chooses in favor of Europa, New Ionia will institute eerily similar policies as the Puritans that aim for transparency and honesty, but result in stifling private human relationships. The individual needs mediating relationships to pursue happiness so as to strengthen himself against social pressures (as in the case of Sherman McCoy) and also to draw him toward others to share his life and inner self (as in the cases of Binx and Newland).

By burdening and weakening the formation and maintenance of meaningful human relationships that constructively shape and limit the individual pursuit of happiness, the Declaration undermines its very purpose—to provide foundation for the pursuit of happiness. As discussed in Chapter 1, our regime is intentionally incomplete due to a recognition that part of human happiness is beyond the state's care and influence. Our political order, thus, requires self-reflection for the furtherance of its ends. The state cannot create all the human goods that contribute to happiness and so cannot effectively guide individuals completely or principally along their pursuit of happiness. The state

cannot do so primarily because many of those human goods come about by free individuals acting together on their own initiative. The unfinished work of the Declaration is for individuals through their various political and social bonds to inquire into their prospects for happiness. Political liberty serves to protect and to secure individuals against coercion so that they may freely pursue and nourish those relationships that contribute to their inquiry into what happiness is and how it is to be pursued.

Our novelists face the task of finding models, alternatives, and ways for the cultivation of relationships. Despite our novelist' sober, often restrained, sometimes foreboding conclusions—not one novel here examined has an unqualified happy ending—the good news is that the Declaration's dedication to the pursuit of happiness allows happiness to be found in terms beyond itself. It is the unfinished work of our “parchment regime” to devise ways and models for individuals to pursue happiness as free and equal beings. As our novelists have shown, it is up to individuals to create, form, and seek out the social relationships and friendships that serve their happiness. In the pursuit of his happiness and interest, the individual is drawn to serve the pursuit of happiness of others as well.

Examination of the pursuit of happiness by American novelists reveals a wide variety of concerns for its prospect, such as materialism, self-sufficiency, and loneliness, but also a subtle hope that the way to happiness is not shut and that the ordinary American is capable of using his freedom well to pursue happiness along better avenues. Despite the dangers posed by using the principles of our “parchment regime” to justify breaking social bonds, our political order's incompleteness preserves a very real liberty that rightly used can contribute to the pursuit of happiness. The individual enjoys

meaningful freedom to act on his own and in coordination with others for the sake of pursuing happiness. Our novelists point us toward each other as our greatest resource to help us and to guide us toward happiness. They do not offer us a solution, answer, or a resolution to what happiness is and how it ought to be pursued. Any final solutions to these questions would be attempts to shut down inquiry and would cause our unofficial thought to become static and stationary. Such a development would do harm to liberalism's insights that part of the individual's inner life is free and that much human thought is inherently ungovernable. The United States turns an apparent political problem into strength by building into our nation an awareness of its limitation and inability to provide for the whole of human life and happiness.

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